PART I

Contexts

1 Schumann's lives, and afterlives: an introduction

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The basic facts of Schumann's life suggest a life in disarray. Born into the *Sehnsucht*-driven world of German Romanticism, he is torn between disciplines. He begins the study of law out of a sense of filial duty but then follows his instinct when he turns to music, though never letting go of two other great passions, literature and poetry. Even as a committed musician, however, he veers between the roles of performer, composer and critic. It is to take a self-inflicted hand injury to free him to compose in earnest, and all urgency. Although endowed with an astonishing capacity to produce very great quantities of music in very short spans of time, he suffers periods of total or near-total creative standstill. These extremes of feverish, splendidly productive activity and exhausted, self-doubting arrest testify to a creative modus operandi that is not only intense, impulsive and at times difficult to live with, but which later observers have felt inclined to identify as 'manic-depressive'. Some critics have also noted that Schumann's works themselves evince these characteristics, and his highly contrastive compositional style still incites puzzlement, if not consternation. Structurally speaking, Schumann cultivated with his seeming free-associated pieces the musically relatively new and disorientating art of brevity, discontinuity and contradiction. They develop from eccentric, spectral and 'poetic' early works to more conventional but nonetheless intricate and introvert late works. This perceived inconsistency in Schumann's nature as well as his compositional style is, however, conspicuously absent when it comes to what is probably the most widely known and possibly most popular aspect of Schumann's life – his passionate wooing and hard-fought winning of Clara Wieck, herself the first woman virtuoso able to break into and succeed in the male-dominated world of nineteenth-century solo performance. Clara's own musical career, long preceding Schumann's own years of public recognition, is a shared source of inspiration as much as it made for years of conflict. Their marriage is an intense and intensely committed one, as well as rather unsettled, enriched and encumbered by many children, and disrupted over and over by extensive travelling and frequent relocations. Like his work, Schumann the man is famous for his extravagant emotional scale. Tempted and capable of going to extremes, he lives through the human passions with alarming flexibility, passing from euphoric states to melancholic lethargy, from instances

of aphasia to moments of rage and violence, culminating in his famous suicide attempt, which leads to confinement in a mental hospital for the last two-and-a-half years of his life. And it is this end, Schumann's madness, and death in madness, that seems emblematic of a life not only out of the ordinary, but also, possibly, out of control. It suggests that there was a quality to this life that was not only excessive, chaotic and incomprehensible, but also irritating, frightening and tragic.

Biography is usually supposed to make sense of a life's chaos, or at least is expected to want to do so. Certainly the writing of a life (as opposed to the casual contemplating, or ignoring of, or being puzzled by one), be it academic or novelistic, might appear, by virtue of using language, capable of capturing a life reasonably well and in reasonable terms. Through writing, one attempts to join the disparate pieces together, align them as a lifeline, create a narrative – a story. And no doubt there is satisfaction to be had and respectability to be gained in rendering a life coherent, however remote, fragmented or incomprehensible it may have been, no matter how distant (historically, culturally, temperamentally) its agent may appear. Yet, it is only with hindsight, the biographer's singular prerogative, that a life can be somehow comprehended at all – or so one would think. Looked at through the retrospective lens of the detached biographer, a life's events tend to line up before our eyes and seem to show why or how one thing led to another. Indeed, not being in the thick of things, a life can be reconstructed rather well, far away from the urgent, the humdrum, the haphazard, that may have meant the living of it. This very urgency, however, still hanging in the air, and the fascination with a related degree of chaos and madness, may become the motor for wanting to revisit a life in the first place, whether out of sheer curiosity, or in the attempt to understand it at long last. Comfortably entrenched behind their writing tools, then, both biographer and autobiographer write up the minutes of a war that is long over.

Schumann's life has inspired a whole range of different types of biographical story-writing, from academic accounts to novels, poems, plays and films. And on these all is embossed, *en filigrane*, the watermark image of one 'Robert Schumann', a great legend, perhaps the legend most powerfully evocative of the nineteenth century's myth of the artist. Interestingly, it tends to begin at the end, with Schumann's decline into madness, and invariably includes his enduring love for Clara. It is this legend, a story of love and madness, and of art and death, that will forever haunt the reception of his work. But there can be no doubt that Schumann himself helped, unknowingly or otherwise, to create it. A self-declared poet-composer, he wrote incessantly, not only music and about music, but also for himself and about himself. Schumann was his own most meticulous analyst and

chronicler and lived a lifetime under the relentless, inquisitive gaze of his own self-searching eyes, screening, scrutinizing and minutely describing every move and every thought, all inner and outer events, all of them, all of the time. A tireless filler of diaries and notebooks and diligent keeper of lists, Schumann has provided his critics with more than one might perhaps ever have wished to know: endless data and detailed description, from meetings with friends and colleagues and visits of places to income and outgoing expenses, future compositional projects and performances, literary extracts, frequency of sexual intercourse, hours of sleep and much more beyond.[1] Taken together with Schumann's autobiographical sketches as well as his vast correspondence with colleagues, friends, family, and especially Clara, these written documents, rich in both quantity and quality, are the fuel that propels biographical research. Whether as the active manipulator of his public image as the Romantic artist-as-genius constructed by himself and his admirers, Schumann is a composer about whom stories always have and always will be told. Yet, such stories may tell us more about the needs of a modern society to keep them alive than, realistically, about a composer in his endeavours to shape or control them.

One story that has influenced our image of Schumann more than any other is the story of Schumann the madman. Much thought and speculation has gone into what nevertheless remains the most darkly mysterious facet of this life. What is of interest is that those biographers who had a particular investment in Schumann's madness inevitably ended up reading Schumann's life backwards. When reading about Schumann's life in the extensive secondary literature based on the equally extensive autograph archive, it is endlessly intriguing to note how Schumann's future – his death, his madness – comes to shadow his past: how this end is seen to have shaped his whole life, and made to explain his beginnings, his being and his becoming. Biography is thus tempted to make Schumann into a figure in the image of universally shared fears and ideals, into a man who is at once one of the great Romantic heroes, and a lost soul. And yet, either one of these versions consistently show us a man amidst the disarray of his solitude. In this brief and necessarily cursory biographical sketch, as well as revisiting the main landmarks of Schumann's life, I shall try to avoid the proleptic approach. Instead, I shall focus in some detail on a few moments of this life that invite a more multi-textured reading of events, events often infused with precisely this kind of indeterminacy, full of contradictions, ambiguities and loose ends. That Schumann's life, or 'personality', may appear to have contained 'problems', hardly needs acknowledgement. These need neither muffling nor continued commemorating, nor, indeed, elaborate justification. Instead, the significance of Schumann's life may lie elsewhere: it may lie not only in the ways in which it was lived, with, without or indeed despite

problems; but rather in the ways in which it was a driven life, forward-flung and animated by a singular imaginative energy channelled into the kind of transformative powers to which his music, characterized by openness and unpredictability, is resounding testimony. This is clearly to be heard in his music still: an astonishing voice articulating the endlessly changing shapes of an inner and outer world, sharply perceived, essentially, as opportunity – for constant reinvention.

The early years

Unsurprisingly, there is nothing in Schumann's early life that gives any hints of who he was to become. Notably, Schumann was not a musical prodigy. Born in the Saxon town of Zwickau in 1810 into an affluent middle-class family, he is the youngest of five children. Off and on, from age three to five-and-a-half he is placed in a foster home, as his mother had contracted typhus.[2] Generations of his ancestors had been farmers until his grandfather became a pastor, and his father a publisher and writer of sorts. The Schumann Brothers Publishing Company, 'the first to call the attention of the German people to the best European writers', produced, in addition to encyclopedic and reference works, pocket editions of Byron, Cervantes, Goethe, Schiller and Scott, authors whom Schumann would come to cherish and who would significantly influence his work. At the age of seven, Schumann begins piano lessons with the local organist. More formal pianistic training does not take place until his move, aged eighteen, to Leipzig, where he commits himself to music with a view to becoming a concert pianist. Sometime in his eighth or ninth year, as the result of a number of musical experiences, the most decisive of which was hearing Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, he decides to make music his profession in one way or another, uncertain whether as performer or composer. He is certainly enthusiastic about live performance: as a nine-year-old, he organizes his school-friends into a theatre troupe and between his eleventh and eighteenth years he appears as a pianist, poet and orator in a series of performances. When Robert is fifteen, his father even contacts Carl Maria von Weber to arrange composition lessons for his son, but nothing comes of it as Weber dies in the same year. Lacking rigorous training on the musical side, Schumann was, in effect, an autodidact, studying musical scores and textbooks on his own, who would at certain points throughout his life return to solitary learning. On the literary side, however, he recruits those who will actively share his interests by founding a *Literarischen Schülerverein*, a literary club, the aim of which is to introduce its members to the works of major European authors, to read biographies of celebrated literati and to discover freshly written works by aspiring ones – the

club's own members. It is some indication of Schumann's drive and zeal, above and beyond adolescent enthusiasm, that the group met no fewer than thirty times a year between 1825 and 1828. As his close school-friend Emil Flechsig would later recall, Schumann was already at this time convinced that he would 'eventually become a famous man'.[3]

Then, his sister commits suicide; his father dies of a 'nervous condition'. Schumann is sixteen years old.

Clearly precocious on the literary side, Schumann the adolescent reads his way through Schiller, Goethe, Wieland, Herder and Jean Paul, among others, but also commercially produces serialized romances and ghost stories: the type of writing eagerly devoured by the emergent reading classes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is Jean Paul, above all, with his challengingly wayward tales and theories about discontinuity and fantasy life, who will nourish Schumann's imagination most lastingly. These and other writers introduce him to the Gothic, the figure of the *Doppelgänger*, the characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, magnetism, the uncanny, travesty, carnival, and the fourth dimension, among many of the more obvious topoi, all of which are forms of representation of otherworldly experience, of otherness, or a heightened perception of the self. They are sought out and consumed by Schumann throughout his life – as rich sources of invention during his twenties; as somewhat less but still powerfully fecund resources in his thirties; and as renewed, though less benign forces of inspiration towards the end of his life. I shall return to this.

If literature, poetry and drama were one side of Schumann's developing identity, music was the other. While his father had become a successful self-made man of letters with a degree of talent, determination, and resilience, Schumann was the first in the family to become an artist. This made him an outsider to his art, with an outsider's impatience, and critical acuity, to innovate. Given these conditions, it is interesting to observe how Schumann's compositions make rather generous use of, or allusions to, literature and poetry (through direct quotation, mottos, titles and various narrative techniques), while accommodating comparatively little musical material from other composers. Where there are instances of musical quotation, they are predominantly of his own compositions, as for example in several of his symphonic works of 1841, where he quotes, directly and indirectly, material from his earlier songs and piano pieces. There are, of course, some notable exceptions: for instance, he recalls Beethoven's melody from the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, Op. 98, in his *Fantasie*, Op. 17 (1836–8), as again in the song cycle *Frauenliebe und -leben*, Op. 42 (1840), and again in his Second Symphony, Op. 61 (1845–6); in a rather different register of reference, he cites the *Marseillaise* in his *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, Op. 26 (1839–40).[4] And there are other examples. Whether from his own works

or that of others, the use of quotation is among the most salient characteristics of Schumann's compositional habits. What are we to make of it? Perhaps it means, among other things, that there are moments during his writing when he feels the need or desire to hand it all over, to have someone else write some of it, a co-author. In the case of musical self-quotation, the co-author is obviously still Schumann himself, even though it is a different Schumann, reappearing from earlier times, and in this sense, then, a stranger after all. In the case of quoting from others, a truly distinct voice enters the compositional scene, unannounced and unacknowledged. What is clear in either case, though, is that Schumann, once in a while, enjoys taking a break from himself, and that he is seeing to it that he is properly replaced in the meantime.

Schumann's use of received musical material, forms and expressions – that side of his compositional idiom that incorporates, through quotation or imitation, imported items and standard formulae (say, for example, passages redolent of Bach chorales and baroque counterpoint, Haydnesque passages and Beethovenian allusions in the chamber music, Wagnerian open-endedness in his dramatic music) – generates a particularly rich inter-textual fabric, albeit the self-conscious distancing. But his taste for extensive historical reference does not occur simply in a historicizing spirit, a preoccupation of his generation with recalling and rekindling what was perceived as its heritage. Instead, Schumann's frequent phases in which he studied Bach's *Das Wohltempierte Klavier* closely; the regular recurrence of his deployment of counterpoint in 1836, 1838, 1842 and again in 1845; his periodic attraction to composing by rule-based decision-making – all this shows a need for control and order and, by implication, a level of the possibility of losing these, as has sometimes been suggested. It is also the case, however, that the early-to-mid nineteenth century was in significant places a 'neo-Baroque' period, emblematically (if not entirely accurately) represented by Mendelssohn's revival of Bach, for example, or by the fact that Brahms's first planned piano opus was a 'Baroque Suite'. Some of Schumann's most poignant pieces – say, certain textural enhancements in *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16 (1838) for piano solo, the uncanny medieval resonances and progressions in songs such as the extraordinary 'Auf einer Burg' from the *Eichendorff Liederkreis*, Op. 39, or 'Ich grolle nicht' from *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48 (both 1840) – bespeak a whole Zeitgeist and evoke the archaeological tendencies and nostalgia for a Golden Age that animated many of that generation of 1810 that included Chopin, Liszt and Wagner.

Once freed from school, Schumann moves, reluctantly, in obedience to his mother's wishes, to Leipzig to study law. But before beginning his studies, he takes the opportunity of a *Bildungsreise*, or cultural tour, of

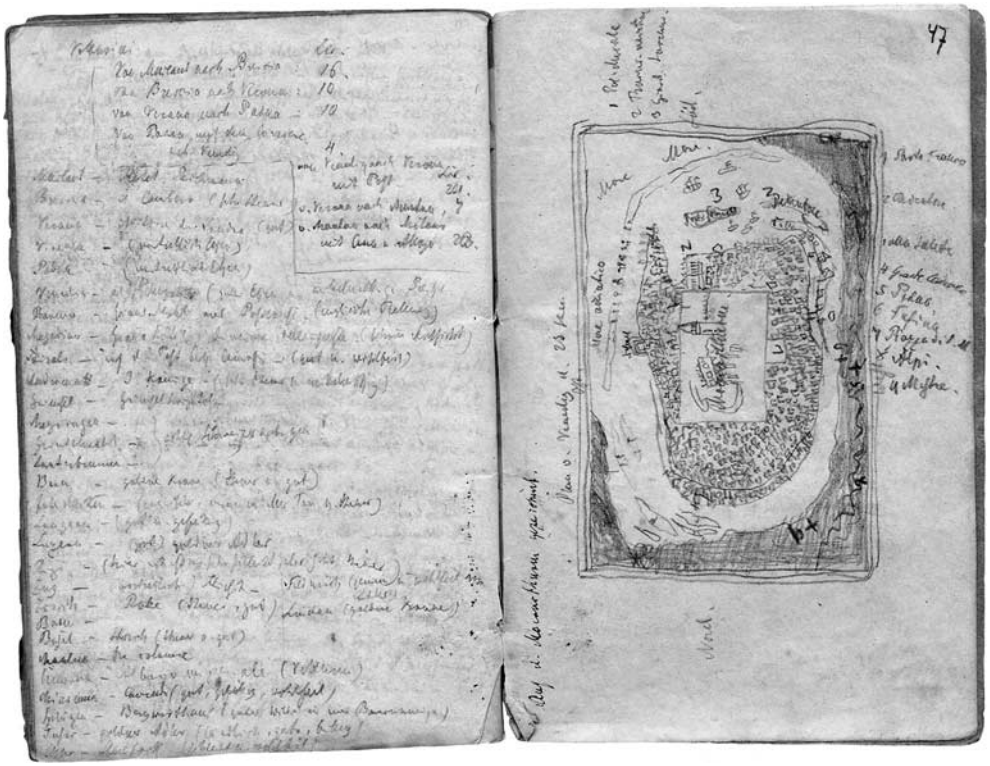

Figure 1.1 Schumann's travel notebook

Bayreuth, Nuremberg, Augsburg and Munich. In the last city he manages to introduce himself to Heinrich Heine, author of the then bestselling *Buch der Lieder* (*Book of Songs*, 1827), which Schumann would later use for some of his most famous song compositions. Once at Leipzig, he attends few, if any, classes in law, but instead enthusiastically explores the city's musical scene, then one of the liveliest in Germany. Very quickly, he finds his way into the more intimately public arena of musical soirées where he mixes with the local musical elite, at once testing and showing off his abilities as a performer and improviser. At this point he begins to compose more seriously, after a few intermittent attempts in his adolescence. He writes mainly Lieder, and continues to write his personal journal, begun the year before, as well as working in a novelistic vein, in a manner inspired by Jean Paul. One of the remarkable things about Schumann's personal writings, already fully present at this time, is his ability to compress lived experience into a single word or phrase, adding one impression, thought or idea after another, connectionless, thus creating an exhilarating succession of events through rows of isolated words. Schumann, in his diaries, as later in his

compositions, is a master of brevity and spontaneity. While these diaries are clearly the reflections of a self-obsessed young man, they are also, however, the most fascinating material for a period study, and tell us, among many other things, how Schumann during this period is up-to-date with all the important literary events of the time and fully informed about the musical scene that he hopes to break into.

The pianistic phase

During his first year in Leipzig, 1828–9, Schumann takes piano lessons with Friedrich Wieck, owner of a music shop and, thanks to his nine-year-old daughter's astonishing pianistic accomplishments, considered one of the world's leading pedagogues. Wieck is impressed and enchanted by Schumann's talent and energy, but already a year later Schumann escapes to Heidelberg to study with the music aesthetician A. F. J. Thibaut, author of the influential *Über die Reinheit der Tonkunst* (*On Purity in Musical Art*). But he quickly tires of what he discovers as Thibaut's pedantry and returns to Leipzig in the autumn of 1830. From this point, he resolves to make his life as a pianist and at last stands up against his mother's requests. He resumes lessons with Wieck, whose pedagogic regime requires him to practise six to eight hours a day in addition to daily lessons. In 1831–2, Schumann also takes composition and counterpoint lessons with Heinrich Dorn, a conductor and composer and, apart from Wieck, the only professional practitioner of music ever to teach him. On his own, Schumann studies counterpoint, mainly Bach's *Das Wohltempierte Klavier* and Italian church music.

It is in Wieck's house, one filled with music and the noise of musical practising, that Schumann gradually falls in love with Clara, Wieck's only daughter, raised and educated by him alone after he separated from his wife when the girl was five years old. Wieck has but a single goal in mind: to turn his daughter into a great pianist. Whether or not aware of the premeditation in her destiny, Clara is an enthusiastic accomplice. By 1828, aged nine, she is already a celebrity, performing at the renowned Leipzig Gewandhaus, and touring, under the watchful eye of her father, all over Germany, Austria and Paris. Wieck, once aware of the growing liaison between his daughter and Schumann, is enraged. Both are soon informed by this austere and solitary man that Schumann is not acceptable as a suitor, a move that inaugurates the beginning of an intensely acrimonious battle between two very dissimilar men over the woman of their hearts: the daughter of one, the beloved of the other.

The hand injury

Schumann's famous hand injury, brought on between 1829 and 1832, shows how much he is prepared to lose in order to fulfil his destiny. Wieck is confident of being able to make Schumann 'within three years into one of the greatest living pianists, who will play more warmly and ingeniously than Moscheles, and more grandly than Hummel'.[5] Spurred on in this way, Schumann is determined to catch up on the technical prowess that, under the influence of Paganini, is then considered the sine qua non of performance: 'I now know for certain that, with much hard work, patience and a good teacher, I will be able to compete with any pianist within six years, for playing the piano is pure mechanics and know-how', he writes to his mother.[6] To speed up his progress and strengthen his right hand, he trusts the promised miracles of Johann Bernard Logier's 'Chiroplast', a contraption designed to give each individual finger greater power by briskly pulling to an extreme degree the finger inserted into the mechanism towards the back of the hand.[7]

Wieck strongly objects (while selling similar instruments in his own shop) but the recommendations of star pianists like Thalberg motivate Schumann to persist.[8] That Schumann continues with the Chiroplast treatment even in the face of its dubious effectiveness is not only proof of his determination but also an example of his capacity to go to extremes. It shows him seeking out and submitting to a slow but thorough-going form of brutality that eventually results in lasting, debilitating injury. But what this episode also shows is Schumann's total commitment to music while destroying his ability to perform it. Caught within a curious dynamic exchange of self-harm and self-realization, Schumann felt compelled to disappear as a pianist in order to reappear, or appear more fully, as a composer. He had to stop himself performing in order to let others perform him. Within weeks of being 'completely resigned' to the ruin of his hand, which by May 1832 he deems 'incurable',[9] he throws himself into composition, producing, apart from a great number of sketches to be turned into finished compositions in later years, the *Studien nach Capricen von Paganini*, Op. 3 (1832); two complete first movements and sketches for two last movements of a G minor symphony, *Auh.* A3 (1832–3); the *Abegg-Variationen*, Op. 1 (1830); *Papillons*, Op. 2 (1829–32); *Six Intermezzi*, Op. 4 (1832); *Toccata in C*, Op. 7 (1829–33); *Carnaval*, Op. 9 (1834–5); and his first Sonata in F sharp minor, Op. 11 (1833–5). Schumann needed the failure in order to have the success.

On a more private level, Schumann's hand paralysis is perhaps even less what it may seem at first sight: an instance of failure or a tendency to give up. One notes that the moment he is prepared to risk the injury, 1829–31, coincides with two increasingly urgent concerns: to establish a public