

I A favourable upbringing: Zwickau 1810–28

Robert Schumann's course in life was set by his particular family circumstances to a greater extent than most musical contemporaries. Even in the Romantic era, musicians were still mainly raised in musical families, or with access to early training. Though outwardly, at least, Schumann was provided with a comfortable life, excellent education, and financial security and status through his father's business and literary standing, he was denied what he needed as a composer, and spent years catching up. Nor till later years did he really have to come to terms with the economic reality of a composer's life.

Schumann was born in Zwickau, Lower Saxony, a town of 5,000 inhabitants situated about forty miles south of Leipzig. His birth on 8 June 1810 was duly announced in the *Zwickauer Wochenblatt* and his father was specified as 'notable burgher' as well as bookseller. Robert was the fifth and last child of August and his wife Johanna Christiane. The father was 37 and the mother already into her early forties, exact date of birth unknown. The elder siblings were three brothers, Eduard (born 1797), Carl (born 1801) and Julius (born 1805), and one sister, Emilie (born 1807); another girl, Laura, had been stillborn the previous year. Though he had lived in Zwickau for only two years before Robert's birth – having since 1808 established a joint bookselling and publishing business, Gebrüder Schumann, with his brother Johann Friedrich Schumann, by now run at separate locations – August already had a national reputation in the world of books as author as well as dealer.

8 The life of Schumann



1 The teenage Robert Schumann. Zwickau, c. 1826.

On his death sixteen years later, an account of his life would be written in admiring terms, and he would subsequently have his own personal entry in Pierer's *Universal Lexicon der Gegenwart und Vergangenheit*, the most comprehensive German encyclopedia of cultural and scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century.¹

August was the driving force in the family, the role model for Robert in his artistic sensitivity as well as creative energy and business sense, and his influence is important for understanding his son. But for all his later status, his life had been one of self-improvement from very humble beginnings. Born the eldest son of a poor clergyman, Johann Friedrich Schumann, in Endschütz near Gera (ten miles or so west of Zwickau), he had fought to reconcile his literary passions with economic survival and the family attitudes he had inherited (his own father had been the first of five brothers to leave the land). Though he received a good school

A favourable upbringing: Zwickau 1810–28 9

education, attending the Latin school at nearby Eisenburg (where he lodged with family), he never had enough resources to further his education as he wished and was largely self-educated. His difficult early years attempting to become a writer were conducted against the background of mundane work in surrounding towns, mainly in the grocery business. His exceptional abilities are clear from the fact that, in order to raise the money to marry his wife Johanna, herself from Gera, he wrote and published several books in the space of only eighteen months, raising 1,000 thalers as a result. Finally able to concentrate on his literary interests after four years of marriage, and jointly running a grocery store at Ronneberg, he opened a bookshop there (against his father-in-law's wishes) and developed his writings with a balance of literary and commercial topics:² in 1797, for example, the romance *Solomon the Wise and His Fool Markoph* – a conversion of an old German folk tale about a Pharaoh's desire for Solomon's wife into a horror story of no fewer than 472 sides – and a mercantile handbook (with a second part the following year) with extensive statistics by region, city and town, a vast project that shows the extent of his ambition in its huge list of subscribers throughout Germany, with royal dedication.³

Throughout Schumann's childhood the reputation of August's business grew, developing his specialisms whilst adding translations of modern European classics into German, especially in pocket editions, then becoming current, so that the firm could claim pre-eminence in introducing this literature. Not the least were contemporary British writers, again showing August's business acumen in anticipating the welter of editions to follow: the mania for Walter Scott observed in 1820s Germany was partly a result of the Gebrüder Schumann edition of his works, which appeared from 1822 to 1830; August also personally translated some works of Byron (*Beppo* and *Childe Harold*), in a larger edition continued by his sons. But he also devoted much attention to his own geographical region: the history, geography and trade of Saxony. He founded two periodicals on Saxon interests and in 1814 embarked on an encyclopedia of Saxony that was unfinished at his death and subsequently completed in eighteen volumes; several years

10 *The life of Schumann*

later, a 'Picture Gallery of the Most Celebrated People of All Time' was a bestseller.⁴

Family circumstances had determined an excellent education for Schumann. He appears to have had his first private tuition at age 4; at 6½ he was sent to a private preparatory school run by a protestant clergyman, Archdeacon Hermann Döhner. Here he learnt Latin at age 7, and Greek and French at 8, and later declared of himself that 'I was a good, well-mannered child and diligent in my studies.' In the spring of 1820, at nearly 10, he entered the Zwickau Lyceum (from 1835 Gymnasium) for the continuation of his education to age 18. This was the finest school in the town, with 195 boys in his year of entry, and provided a classical education of the highest standard, just as the eminence of such schools began to grow in Germany, with great emphasis on Latin and Greek (in the top class Latin lessons were conducted entirely in Latin) compared with History, Geography and German, and very little attention to modern subjects like mathematics and arithmetic. The deputy headmaster, Carl Ernst Richter, who taught Schumann, was a man of radical political views and a prolific author, who edited the weekly periodical *Die Biene* (The Bee), banned in 1833; his liberal attitudes, including religious free-thinking, left their influence on the Schumanns, father and son, and Robert grew up with the foundations of an independent outlook as well as a sense of social status.⁵

Zwickau in the earlier nineteenth century was a quiet little town of 900 houses. August Schumann describes the town picturesquely in his encyclopedia of Saxony as being situated in 'one of the most remote corners of Saxony', evoking the character of its position on the left bank of the river Mulde, its gardens, meadows and fields, and wooded hills, observing that one could 'call it a park with vegetation richer than most other parts of Germany'. But the image had been somewhat tarnished in modern times. As a town situated on east-west trade routes (one main road went to Dresden and southern Germany, another to Leipzig and Bohemia), it became, with Germany in the grip of Napoleon's conquest of eastern Europe in 1810, a place of military transit. In 1812, 150,000 French troops marched in and out of Zwickau. Returning

A favourable upbringing: Zwickau 1810–28 11

defeated the following year, the soldiers brought disease and famine. The sights recorded by the historian Emil Herzog for 1813 are appalling – with corpses in fields and rivers; typhoid, bubonic plague and smallpox; and even piles of severed limbs in the town. Nine per cent of Zwickau's population was wiped out.⁶

Though Zwickau was not a centre of culture, Schumann had the best it could offer. The Lyceum and the two largest churches, especially the Marienkirche, provided a focus for the town's music. And in literature, he had a head start through his father's literary preoccupations. From childhood he had the run of his extensive library, one that inevitably contained far more than the boy could have found at school and in town, and his artistic sensitivity certainly received its greatest early stimulus through literature. His literary sense found various outlets at home and at school – in writing poetry and stories, and participating in plays on themes local, historical and contemporary. 'Robber plays' (reflecting current literary fashion for an earlier genre) were amongst the earliest. 'I, my brother [Julius] and some other school friends had a really charming theatre that made us well known all around Zwickau, and even famous (sometimes we collected 2 to 3 thalers). We performed completely extemporaneously, cracked horrible jokes and made outrageously silly puns.' His father, present at these events, lavished praise and encouragement on him.⁷

At 13, Schumann began to collect his own literary efforts – poems; dramatic fragments, including a scene from a five-act tragedy *Der Geist*; biographical sketches of famous composers; and album verses under the pseudonym Skuländer – in an anthology book entitled *Blätter und Blümchen aus der goldene Aue* (*Leaves and Little Flowers from the Golden Meadow*). At 14, along with his brothers, he was temporarily engaged in the publishing business, helping his father to collect and translate essays for his *Bildergalerie der berühmter Menschen*. Age 15, in autumn 1825, he – apparently chief organizer – and ten fellow students founded a society for the study of German literature, where they would learnedly discuss classical and Romantic authors, as well as members' original creations. Before disbanding in February 1828,

12 The life of Schumann

this society provided Schumann with a forum for the systematic study of Schiller's dramas, and the essays of Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schlegel. Also, from age 15 to 18, beginning in November–December 1825, Schumann tried a variety of literary genres, including his own verses based on metrical German versions of Latin poems, and a volume of selected odes of Horace in translation, obviously inspired by school study. Most notable was *Allerley aus der Feder Roberts der Mulde* (A Miscellany from the Pen of Robert of the River Mulde). This had lyric poetry – more than thirty poems, dramatic fragments, also some dramatic essays, including one on *Coriolan*; and criticism and essays on aesthetic topics, including extracts from [C. F.] Daniel Schubart's theory of musical aesthetics, *Ideen zur ein Ästhetik der Tonkunst*.⁸

Shortly before leaving school he took an active part as proofreader in his brothers' preparing of an edition of Forcellini's *Totius latinatis lexicon* of 1771, issued in a four-volume German version by Gebrüder Schumann from 1831 to 1835, with the participation of leading literary scholars. By age 18, thanks to both school and home, he had an exceptional literary knowledge. He knew the Latin and Greek classics well and was able to offer opinions on Sophocles, Horace, Plato and others in the writings that he committed to his diaries and commonplace books. Though he was already attracted to the dramas of Schiller (but not as yet as much to Goethe, although he knew *Faust* thoroughly, and was called 'Faust' and 'Fust' by his friends), his chief attraction was now to Romantic literature, especially Ernst Schultze, Franz von Sonnenberg and Byron (knowing some of the latter's works through his father's translations). But he was especially overwhelmed from 1827 by the writings of Jean Paul Richter, reading *Flegeljahre*, (*Winged Years*, or *Carefree Years*), *Titan*, *Hesperus* and *Siebenkäs*; Robert's early letters to his mother are full of references to Richter's works and are often couched in his flowery literary style (though it was already becoming outmoded by the 1820s).⁹

Schumann's musical instincts seem not to have received the same early stimulus in the home. He was not apparently introduced to the piano as a matter of course, but rather comments 'it was probably the

A favourable upbringing: Zwickau 1810–28 13

great deal of singing I did that made my parents aware of my gifts', most likely at age 6 to 7. Though music had its place, it was a minor part of home life: Schumann's mother sang, describing herself as 'the living book of arias' on account of her knowledge, though there are no records of any performance; and she claimed that it was at her instigation that Schumann had his first piano lessons at age 7 with Johann Gottfried Kuntsch (1777–1855) who, at 40, was organist and choir-master of the *Marienkirche*. Kuntsch also taught at the Lyceum and was a key figure in the town as an organizer and conductor of concerts, one who made strenuous efforts to raise the town's musical standards. But Schumann must have played the piano earlier, as he was already improvising. Though doubtless inspired by the character of his later piano music, Wasielewski's unattributed statement that from childhood Schumann 'possessed rare taste and feeling for portraying feelings and characteristic traits in melody [and] could sketch the different dispositions of his intimate friends by certain figures and passages on the piano so exactly and comically that everyone burst into loud laughter at the similitude of the portrait' was probably true. And Schumann certainly claimed to confide his deepest feelings to the piano. Early in his musical tuition he also learnt the flute and cello with Herr Meissner, the municipal music director.¹⁰

His first great musical experience occurred at age 9 in 1819. He was taken to hear the pianist and composer Ignaz Moscheles play in Karlsbad, and thereafter retained a lifelong admiration for him and his works. On his return, Robert demanded and was given a Streicher Viennese grand piano, and now gave home concerts. At around the same age, he was taken to his first opera, *Die Zauberflöte*, in Leipzig. On entering the Gymnasium at Easter 1820 he had a much broader stage. He made various appearances in evening entertainments at the school, showing growing fluency as a pianist, and also appearing as a reciter. The first appearance was in 1821 or 1822, as a pianist in four-handed works – mainly variations by Pleyel, Cramer, Ries, Moscheles and Weber – and also duets with a boy of his own age, the son of the leader of a regimental band stationed in Zwickau named Piltzing and another

14 The life of Schumann

pupil of Kuntsch. On 6 November 1821, Schumann took the piano part in Kuntsch's performance of Friedrich Schneider's then very popular oratorio *Die Weltgericht* at the Marienkirche, standing up to do it.¹¹

In 1808, within a year of beginning lessons with Kuntsch, Schumann had composed several dances for piano (now lost), doubtless based on the models he knew, some possibly from the music his father obtained through the trade and brought home. Schumann formed a small orchestra of school fellows, and composed, in January 1822 at the age of 11, the work he designated his 'op. 1': a setting of Psalm 150 – of twenty-six pages of thirteen-line score ruled by himself, other pupils and friends – for soprano, alto, and an orchestra of two violins, viola, two flutes, two oboes, bassoon, horn, two trumpets, timpani and piano. In the same year or the one after he followed this up with an 'Overture' and 'Chor von Landleuten', numbered op. 1, no. 3 – a nine-page overture followed by a chorus beginning 'Wie reizend ist der schöne Morgen', apparently inspired by Paer's *Achille* – augmenting his orchestral forces with as many of his friends as could sing. The audience consisted of members of the Schumann family. Schumann later recalled his infantile technique: 'I'm almost ashamed when I look at it now. I had no knowledge ... and even wrote like a child.' His *Project Book* for these years also suggests the start of an opera. Informal concerts at his home included the overture to Vincinco Righini's *Tigrane* (the score obtained by his father) with a pair of violins, two flutes, a clarinet and two horns, Schumann filling in the rest on the piano.¹²

In 1823, at around age 13, occurred the most forward-looking musical influence of Schumann's youth when he met the family Carus. Carl Erdmann Carus was a Zwickau merchant, a keen friend of music and musicians. His nephew Ernst August Carus was a surgeon and superintendent at the mental hospital housed in the castle of the nearby town of Colditz. His attractive wife Agnes, a gifted and discerning amateur singer, used to come to Zwickau to visit her brother, who held regular soirées to which he invited Schumann. She was looking for a piano accompanist as well as for artistic stimulus. Eight years

A favourable upbringing: Zwickau 1810–28 15

his senior, she now provided a focus for Schumann's musical creativity, and her home as a performance venue. In the summer of 1827 she resided in Zwickau, where he not only accompanied her but also composed songs for her. Later Schumann described the atmosphere in C. E. Carus's house:

it was in his house where the names of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven were spoken daily and enthusiastically – in his house that I first saw these masters' works, especially their quartets, but seldom heard in that little town, often playing the piano parts [sic] myself, – in Carus's house, so well known to almost every native artist, where artists were always hospitably welcomed, where all was joy, serenity, and music.

Moreover, here he also became subject to the new influence of Schubert, at this point only little known, and heard only in the most progressive circles. Schubert became the closest companion of Schumann's musical imagination. When Schumann heard of Schubert's death on 19 November 1828, he wept all night.¹³

But whilst Schumann's creative imagination was coming under new and vital stimuli, the technical development of his piano playing as such came to a sudden end at age nearly 15 around 1825. Having already reached the level of playing Weber's *Invitation to the Dance* publicly in 1824, he now played Moscheles' *Alexander Variations* at a home concert, and Kuntsch declined to give him any more lessons. Kuntsch would later write to Schumann to congratulate him when he decided to make the commitment to music as a career in 1830. Kuntsch was not a great musician, with limited pianistic skills: Clara later dismissed him as unworthy of her husband's talent. But he was clearly enlightened, opened many musical doors, and gave Schumann crucial support and sympathy. Schumann later dedicated the *Studies for Pedal Piano*, op. 56 to him in 1845, and in 1852 sent him a laurel wreath to honour his fifty years as a teacher, echoing his earlier comment that 'you were the only one to recognize the musical gift that dominated my nature and to set me at an early age on the path on which my guardian angel was sooner or later bound to lead me'.¹⁴

16 *The life of Schumann*

This was a key moment in Schumann's musical development, with new friends and new musical experiences constantly enriching his imagination, and with his father's sympathetic, supportive eye, surely keen to offer Robert the opportunities he himself had lacked. But its promise was to be thwarted. According to Robert's record, shortly before his death in 1826 August had applied to no less an eminence than Weber himself to teach Schumann – that is, shortly after the lessons with Kuntsch ended. But Weber had left for London, was in fact mortally ill, and soon died there: August's own death followed shortly after. If August Schumann had made this contact successfully, subsequent history might have been very different. As it was Robert was left without a guide. Therefore he had to continue by himself with his compositions, though without clear goal.¹⁵

In 1827 he notes the beginnings of a piano concerto in E minor, and other attempts would follow in 1828–31. Schumann claimed to have already completed many songs and piano pieces, though none of the solo keyboard compositions survive. In the years 1827–8, he wrote thirteen songs to texts by Justinus Kerner (a medical doctor interested in the supernatural, who had just published a book based on his parapsychological studies), Byron, Ernst Schultze, Jacobi, Goethe and himself. They already reflect experience and show a natural mastery of both simple strophic to through-composed form, and of vocal expression and the relationship of voice and piano; in three Schumann appears as both poet and composer. Some of these, his first truly original compositions, he sent on 15 July 1828 to the Brunswick Kapellmeister and song composer Gottlob Wiedebein, with the appeal 'Be indulgent to a youth who, uninitiated in the mysteries of sound, yet inspired to try his untrained hand at original composition, now lays his first efforts before you for your kindly but strict impartial opinion.' Wiedebein replied quickly that 'your songs have many defects, a great many, and I would like to call them the sins of youth', urging Schumann to discipline himself and look for 'truth in melody and harmony and in expression – in short poetic truth'. Facing his reality Schumann responded in August 1828 'I had probably forgotten to tell you in my last letter that