

Schumann, Subjectivity

*Oh, that I were
 the viewless spirit of a lovely sound,
 A living voice, a breathing harmony,
 A bodiless enjoyment – born and dying
 with the blest tone that made me!*¹

In one of the most famous utterances from Byron's *Manfred*, the eponymous protagonist, standing perilously atop a mountain peak in the Alps and set to throw himself off into oblivion far below, longs to be transformed into the musical strain he hears piping away in the distance. Desperately seeking to escape from himself, to flee from his own guilt-ridden existence, the tormented anti-hero wishes to *become* music – to be at one with its tones, living and dying with the irresistible flow of melody, following its inevitable course from sound into silence. Short of complete annihilation of his being, the only solace he can envisage is that of losing his sense of self through such immersion in the living presence of sound that his spirit may fuse with that of music. In such intense experiences as this, as Byron's tortured protagonist recognises, the emotionally susceptible human subject may hear music so deeply that, as T. S. Eliot put it, 'you are the music, while the music lasts'.² Manfred's case exemplifies perhaps the ultimate degree of what in this study will be called musical subjectivity: not conceiving music to be *like* the self but desiring the self to *be* music.

Byron's lines form an apt starting point for this present book. For the work in which they are found inspired Robert Schumann to what, by his own account, was one of his most personal creations, the incidental music he wrote in 1848 to Byron's drama.³ *Manfred* is also a piece which foregrounds a particularly Romantic notion of subjectivity: not only the nineteenth century's concern with the alienated individual, with the reality of subjective feeling and an inescapably egocentric perspective on the world,

¹ Byron, *Manfred*, Act I, Scene 2, ll. 52–56.

² T. S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', V, from *Four Quartets*.

³ See Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski, *Robert Schumann: Eine Biographie* (1858; revised fourth edition, Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1906), p. 398.

but with the *sound* of subjectivity, with the roles music and voice may play in constructing a sense of living presence, identity, and recognition – the distinction between music and speech, sound and silence, presence and absence, .between the living and the dead.

The nineteenth century, as many writers would have it, is ‘the age of subjectivity’. After the universalism, sociability, and appeal to the *sensus communis* of the Enlightenment, Romanticism firmly placed the burden of philosophic truth back onto the individual, onto the thinking, feeling, meaning-making subject who constitutes the world for itself and provides its own criterion of authenticity.⁴ In this era of subjective surplus, it was the Germans most of all who gained a reputation for pre-eminence in gazing inward into the depths of the self. ‘We prefer to live in the inwardness of emotion and of thinking’ proposed their most celebrated thinker of the time: ‘our mind, more than that of any other European nation, is in general turned inwards’.⁵ It was moreover in music that many German intellectuals and artists found the ideal form of articulation for this sense of subjective inwardness and interior depth – music, of all the arts, being in their estimation the most subjective. And of all composers during this period (and perhaps ever since), it is surely Robert Schumann who has most often been characterised, for better or for worse, through recourse to the notion of subjectivity.

The rhetoric of subjectivity has accompanied the life and music of Schumann throughout the last two centuries. By his own account, the young Schumann felt there was ‘more subjectivity than objectivity’ in his judgements and work, discerning that his temperament expressed itself more strongly in feeling and imagination than in the power of external observation.⁶ Even within his lifetime, critics of radically opposed persuasions would pick up on this perception. For Franz Brendel, Schumann stands as ‘subjectivity in its most pointed form’. The composer reveals himself in his music as ‘a subject focused entirely on itself, one that lives and breathes exclusively in its own inwardness . . . an individuality that

⁴ See, for instance, Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999); Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind (Encyclopaedia, Pt III)*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), §394, p. 49.

⁶ Robert Schumann, *Tagebücher*, ed. Georg Eismann and Gerd Nauhaus, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1971–82), vol. I (1827–38), p. 242 (‘Sein Temperament . . . aeußert sich mehr als Empfindungs, denn als Anschauungsvermögen, daher mehr Subjektiv.[ist] als Objekt[ivist] in seinen Urtheilen u. Producten; das Gefühl starker, als das Streben’).

expresses only itself and its personal emotional states, [depicting] the world only as far as the Self has been touched by it'.⁷ His nemesis, Eduard Hanslick, did not begrudge Brendel the general point. Schumann, thought Hanslick, was 'not for the majority but for individuals': his works are 'too interior and strange . . . too deep, too simple'.⁸

Already in his lifetime, then, Schumann emerges in critical reception as an inward-looking, self-absorbed figure, the creator of highly personal music whose veiled secrets and whimsical individuality bespeak the subjectivity of its creator. Far from receding as Schumann's music became ever more firmly established and better comprehended by a growing public in the decades after his death, such portrayals would solidify into a truism. His first biographer, Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski, introduced his 1858 study by noting how the music of his former friend and colleague constantly 'points back to the subjective quality of the creating artist'. 'The productions of his mind never became objective, and never broke loose, or freed themselves from his individual self.'⁹ These same themes would be taken up and perpetuated by most subsequent writers. August Reissmann, writing in 1865, held that Schumann 'never regarded music otherwise than as the art of representing those things which stirred his soul', just as Hubert Parry, two decades later, proposed that 'the natural bent of his disposition seemed to be to look inwards'.¹⁰ Indeed, in William Henry Hadow's opinion the composer was if anything 'too intensely subjective' – to this extent displaying 'the same strengths and weakness as Byron', claimed Hadow, an artist 'with whom he has often been compared'.¹¹ This link between Schumann and subjectivity has been perpetuated throughout numerous textbooks and popular histories down to the present day, showing little sign of diminishing even now.

⁷ Franz Brendel, 'Robert Schumann with Reference to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and the Development of Modern Music in General (1845)', trans. Jürgen Thym, in R. Larry Todd (ed.), *Schumann and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 334, 323–4.

⁸ Eduard Hanslick, *Sämtliche Schriften: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Dietmar Strauß (Vienna: Böhlau, 1993–), vol. I (*Aufsätze und Rezensionen 1844–48*), p. 106 (quoted by Leon Botstein, 'History, Rhetoric, and the Self: Robert Schumann and Music Making in German-Speaking Europe, 1800–1860', in R. Larry Todd (ed.), *Schumann and his World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 4).

⁹ Wasielewski, *Robert Schumann*, p. viii, translation taken from the English edition, *Life of Robert Schumann*, trans. A. L. Alger (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1871), p. 8.

¹⁰ August Reissmann, *Robert Schumann: Sein Leben und Seine Werke* (Berlin: Guttentag, 1865), p. 34; C. Hubert H. Parry, *Studies of Great Composers* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1887), p. 317.

¹¹ William Henry Hadow, *Studies in Modern Music: Hector Berlioz, Robert Schumann, Richard Wagner* (London: Seeley and Company, 1893), p. 224.

This inclination is epitomised in one of the most celebrated of all characterisations of the composer, Friedrich Nietzsche's famous barb in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). Schumann, 'who took himself seriously, and from the start was hard to take', possessed 'a dangerous tendency (doubly dangerous among Germans) to quiet lyricism and intoxication of feeling'. Characterised in passive, self-absorbed terms, Schumann is memorably dismissed as that strange figure, 'half Werther, half Jean Paul, fleeing into the "Saxon Switzerland" of his soul'. 'Is it not good fortune', wonders Nietzsche aloud, 'a relief, a liberation, that precisely this Schumannesque Romanticism has been overcome?'¹² As so often with Nietzsche, outward scorn masks a deeper personal affinity. The Saxon-born philosopher had adored much of Schumann's music as an adolescent and would ultimately share the same unhappy fate as his predecessor, spending the final years of his life insane.

When it comes to loving Schumann, of course, few figures have done so more openly than the twentieth-century French theorist Roland Barthes. And for Barthes, Schumann is similarly characterised by the language of subjectivity – 'the musician of solitary intimacy, of the amorous and imprisoned soul *that speaks to itself*'.¹³ As this example underscores, even in a poststructuralist climate where the notion of the subject has been undermined, or when the search for full selfhood appears to result inevitably in failure, Schumann remains the paradigmatic case of subjectivity. Hence Barthes may speak of the composer's early piano cycle *Carnaval* as 'the theatre of the decentering of the subject', while for the Lacanian thinker Slavoj Žižek, 'the very formal structure of Schumann's music expresses the paradox of modern subjectivity: the bar – the impossibility of "becoming oneself", of actualizing one's identity'.¹⁴

One of the most prominent factors contributing to the perceived subjective quality of Schumann's music lies in how – at least in the popular imagination – his life and work are bound inextricably together. Already in

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, §245, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1980), vol. V, p. 188. 'Saxon Switzerland' is the name given to a range of high peaks in Saxony that rival the Alps in scenic impact (a feature that would be utilised by Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich in his *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* and Carl Gustav Carus in the picture given on this book's cover). Both Schumann and Nietzsche were natives of Saxony.

¹³ Roland Barthes, 'Loving Schumann', in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 293, emphasis mine.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 296; Slavoj Žižek, 'Robert Schumann: The Romantic Anti-Humanist', in *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 205.

Wasielewski's pioneering account of the composer, the author informs his readers that 'Robert Schumann was so rare a nature, that his creative powers, especially at the outset, can be fully understood and correctly judged only by a knowledge of his life and its manifold conditions.'¹⁵ One hundred and forty years later his modern biographer John Daverio would likewise claim that 'art and life are perhaps more closely interwoven in Schumann's music than in that of any other composer of the nineteenth century'.¹⁶ To a greater degree than with almost any other composer, the biographical subject who created it is commonly felt to be present behind Schumann's music. Accounts of the composer's life are dominated as to an equal degree are those of his music by the story of his love for Clara Wieck and how the two heroically overcame her wicked father's scruples to marry – a love story acquiring almost mythic status in music history. Such associations are only aided by the composer's tendency to encode the names of the loves in his life into his music in the form of musical ciphers, dancing letters, and musical sphinxes – to the extent that posterity will discover coded messages enshrining his beloved's name in his music (the ubiquitous 'Clara' theme) even when there is no evidence for this supposition whatsoever.¹⁷ (This interweaving of life and art becomes especially problematic, of course, when we reach the composer's final mental illness, the works of Schumann's later years having long lain under the dubious shadow cast back on them retrospectively by his mental breakdown in the early months of 1854.)

Moreover, the subjective quality of Schumann's music, the sense that the composer is somehow present within his work, is often accompanied by the feeling of a personal relationship with his inner world as listeners. Schumann appears to speak intimately to each and every one of those who love his music. A recent account by cellist and confirmed *Schumannianer* Steven Isserlis may stand as representative of a popular view of this quality. For Isserlis, Schumann 'was perhaps the ultimate romantic, confessional composer . . . much of his music explored his own deeply private world . . . allow[ing] us to eavesdrop on his inner life'.¹⁸

¹⁵ Wasielewski, *Robert Schumann*, pp. vii–viii / *Life of Robert Schumann*, p. 7.

¹⁶ John Daverio, *Robert Schumann: Herald of a "New Poetic Age"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 131; such views are also mentioned, and problematised, at the start of Daverio's volume.

¹⁷ The idea was popularised by Eric Sams in a series of pieces in *The Musical Times* from the late 1960s on; a strong challenge to it was issued by John Daverio, though despite its questionable basis the 'Clara theme' has proved hard to eradicate from popular writing on the composer.

¹⁸ Steven Isserlis, 'In defence of Schumann', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2010. Isserlis appeals to a comparable claim made rather earlier by Sir Thomas Beecham: 'When we listen to other

Similarly, pianist Jonathan Biss, writing in the same newspaper a few years later, contends that Schumann's music 'is not only lofty, but personal. Excruciatingly personal. So much of its shattering emotional power comes from the feeling it conveys that confidences are being shared – that Schumann is disclosing the sorts of truths one often hides even from oneself.'¹⁹ What both musicians are expressing is that peculiar quality many of us also feel when listening to this music, that we are eavesdropping on Schumann's innermost thoughts, on his very self. Or is it in fact on ourselves?

Perhaps owing to this personal quality, this sense of identification on the part of performers and listeners with the subjectivity of the music and that of the composer behind it, and the evident vulnerability of both, Schumann inspires highly protective, personal feelings of affection on the part of his followers. Even if he occasionally appears to fall short, his music is still loved for what we think it is trying to do, for the fragile subject we faintly discern resounding behind the notes, and it will be defended passionately by devoted *Schumannianer* against critical attack. The subjectivity of Schumann's music arises from the sense that there is something deeply personal inside it, something personal to us too; that its idiosyncrasies may be understood by those who hear that 'softer tone' that resounds for them alone, in whose presence, so it seems, they hear something of themselves.

Aims of This Study

From his own time down to the present day, then, Schumann has routinely been associated with all things subjective, with intimacy, interiority, emotionality, idiosyncrasy, with music that says something about our innermost, most private sense of self. For critics, intellectuals, musicians, and public alike, Schumann signifies subjectivity. Set against this cultural background, the present study seeks to explore and interrogate the now-conventional association between Schumann's music and the idea of

composers', holds Beecham, 'we are seldom forgetful that the author of the discourse is addressing himself to a thousand or two others beside ourselves. There is none of this platform manner about Schumann, who has accomplished the miraculous feat of clothing exquisite and delicate fancies in subtle and secret phrases that each one of us feels to have been devised for his own especial understanding.' *A Mingled Chime: Leaves from an Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1944), p. 5.

¹⁹ Jonathan Biss, 'From fact to fantasie: discovering the real Schumann', *The Guardian*, 18 May 2013.

subjectivity. It has three broad aims, which for the sake of convenience may be designated as *critical*, *musical*, and *philosophical*.

1. *Critical*. First is an attempt to define and refine the use of subjectivity as a term applied to music – to clarify its various possible meanings and functions, to delimit its range of applicability and offer justification for its use. As with so many other popular expressions, ‘subjectivity’ is a central, though at times diffuse and insufficiently clear conceptual term in much musicological discussion. This book consequently aspires to undertake a critical examination of the notion of musical subjectivity, focusing on Schumann as the ideal case study for this task.

2. *Musical*. Conversely, alongside this specific critical urge to elucidate the idea of subjectivity there is a reciprocal desire to draw on the analytical and aesthetic perspectives suggested by this term as a means of interpreting Schumann’s music. Of course, I am aware that viewing Schumann through this lens could easily reinforce certain conventional tropes of reception history, and I would like to make clear from the start that the idea of subjectivity is not the only approach to understanding Schumann, nor should the term be applied in a blanket fashion to all his music. The private poet of the piano and solo Lied also wrote symphonies, *Der Paradies und die Peri*, an opera, and numerous pieces for communal music-making or pedagogical purposes. Nor should we dismiss the more public Schumann, that which appears to speak (as it were) in the first-person plural or third person, as being somehow not the ‘true’ Schumann. Nevertheless, since his day subjectivity has proved a central category for understanding Schumann, and this notion may therefore afford us with a particularly valuable means of exploring and interpreting part of his musical output.

3. *Philosophical*. Ultimately, the exploration of subjectivity in Schumann’s music is a pretext for a bigger claim about music and subjectivity throughout the last two centuries in Western culture. Subjectivity, alongside related notions such as the subject and the self, is often viewed as a problem – indeed as a peculiarly contemporary problem characteristic of the modern era. A larger philosophic import is provided by this study’s consideration of how music, the medium that historically was singled out as the most subjective of the arts at this time, may constitute an active force in constructing subjectivity, a way of articulating a culture’s sense of what it is to be a human subject. This musical articulation need not simply reinforce existing structures but can create new expressions of subjectivity; in an account where the idea of musical agency is foregrounded, a particular concern is in bringing to light what music might tell us about subjectivity that other communicative forms of expression do not, or at least not in the same way.

To avoid or at least forestall some of the misunderstandings that can be common in musicological discussion, a few words about the methodological premises and intended scope of this book may also be in order. Firstly, a comment on the use of history and its relation to theory. I should make clear from the outset that this account is not intended primarily as an exercise in historical reconstruction, in recovering an earlier understanding of subjectivity apparently held in Schumann's time, but rather as critiquing and enriching our current understanding of Western classical music – Schumann's music in particular, taken as an exemplary instance – and its relation to the idea of subjectivity. Although much of the discussion is rooted in the historical and cultural world of early to mid-nineteenth-century Germany, Schumann's music has remained part of European musical culture up to the present day, and with it a reception history that sees it as a peculiarly potent expression of a modern form of subjectivity, however subtly this conception may have altered since the composer's time. What I am trying to explicate is something broader and more directly relevant to our current concerns.

Hence, while drawing on history, this book is manifestly philosophical and transhistorical rather than antiquarian in both means and ends. Transhistorical is not the same as ahistorical or timeless: rather, it points to the enduring legacy of the past, for better or for worse, in the present, the 'persistence of subjectivity' as a concern over the last two centuries. This is not, therefore, to hold that modern-day discussion of musical subjectivity is identical to that of the early nineteenth century, and I do not claim that my account of subjectivity in Schumann's music is identical to something he or his contemporaries would have recognised – though neither is it wholly unrelated either. My belief (one shared by many others in the fields of philosophy and the history of ideas) is that something akin to subjectivity has been present throughout a long period of human history, even if the forms it takes and the significance attached to them have sometimes changed. Schumann's life and music offers an especially pointed historical manifestation, one whose relevance – as we have seen – still holds for today.

This relation to history and openness to diverse theoretical formulations has further important implications on the models of subjectivity used. With any complex topic such as this, it strikes me as extremely unlikely that any one approach will exhaust the idea's meaning or the different ways in which one may profitably understand it. Rather, one needs a flexible and inclusive range of approaches to the problem, each of which may draw out some important aspects but is inevitably silent on others. Thus, I have tried to avoid the type of enquiry that assumes a currently fashionable theorist is

the first and last word on a topic that has been discussed since antiquity; equally, I have been open to a wide range of perspectives from Plato to postmodernism, encompassing along the way German Idealism and Romanticism, psychoanalysis, and analytic philosophy, without, I hope, being unduly biased towards or against one. The turn to postmodern or poststructuralist theories of the subject has, for instance, been especially prominent in musicology over the last decade, and I draw in these pages on familiar figures such as Lacan, Kristeva, Žižek, Derrida, and Lévinas, who in many cases offer useful perspectives on the topic, but not to the neglect of other, no less relevant thinkers before and after.

Finally, I am aware that the surname ‘Schumann’ in my title could refer to one of at least two composers: either Robert, the subject under investigation here, or Clara (née Wieck). The latter is far from absent from these pages, and in a handful of places her music is discussed, albeit within the wider context of her husband’s work. I have written elsewhere on Clara Schumann’s music, and the burgeoning interest in her life, career, and, especially, compositional output is one of the most heartening developments in contemporary musicology.²⁰ But the focal point of the widespread discourse on musical subjectivity over the last two centuries has undeniably been Robert rather than Clara Schumann, and it is accordingly his life and work that is taken as a case study for exploring this theme.

Structure and Outline

Taking its inspiration from its subject matter, this book is arranged as a series of *Fantasiestücke* or *Subjektivitätsszenen* around the subject of Schumann and subjectivity. Save for the opening ‘Prosopopoeic Preliminaries’ and the corresponding ‘Epilogue’ (which themselves form a higher-level frame lying outside the main body of the work), these chapters are split into contrasting pairs, reflecting the movement from self to other that seems so deeply bound up with the notion of subjectivity in the modern era. While not wedded to chronological sequence and flitting freely between works, genres, and periods, a degree of linear order is still present across the volume, insofar as the book moves most generally

²⁰ See, for instance, my article ‘Clara Wieck’s A minor Piano Concerto: Formal Innovation and the Problem of Parametric Disconnect in Early Romantic Music’, *Music Theory and Analysis*, 8/2 (2021), 1–28.

from a concentration on Schumann's music of the 1830s and early 1840s towards a greater focus on his later music in the closing chapters. Moreover, the broader philosophical argument unfolds in a cumulative fashion, whereby problems arising in one chapter are often addressed in the chapter that follows – normally to be followed by yet more questions that will similarly require future elaboration. Nonetheless, readers should feel free to tackle the contents of this book in any order they wish: it would be inopportune in a study which foregrounds Schumann's music and Romantic notions of subjectivity to insist upon too strict a sense of linear narrative.

The opening chapter, 'Defining Subjectivity', sets out the terminological and conceptual ideas that provide a basis for the remainder of the book. Problematising the topic of musical subjectivity, it explicates the various meanings that have been given to this awkward notion and through increasing clarification proposes a range of potential meanings. Subjectivity here appears to refer to the experience of music as akin to a living being, an animate consciousness, but such that the experience may be of an apparent immediacy that shades it into a privileged first-person perspective – as if somehow viewing it as part of oneself. The second part of the chapter looks in turn to how subjectivity manifests itself both in music and in history, interrogating the notion of the musical subject through a series of questions that may be summarised as *who*, *how* and *where*, *when* and *why*? One of the properties of the idea of subjectivity identified here is that it is not a pregiven entity but a dynamic process that requires our own active participation for its interpretation. And thus, while a number of conceptual questions remain to be answered at the close of this chapter, it is given to the main body of the book to respond to these matters.

Part I, 'Hearing Subjects', turns attention to Schumann, addressing the composer's early grappling with the Romantic problematisation of subjectivity and personal identity and the notion of the divided subject frequently present in his music of the 1830s and early 1840s. In 'Hearing the Self', I trace the historical development of subjectivity in music up to Schumann's time, relating this to the breakdown of the model of the transcendental subject, the emergence of Romantic irony and whimsical questioning of subjective identity in writers such as Jean Paul and E. T. A. Hoffmann. Against this backdrop we may better understand Schumann's creation of his alter egos Florestan and Eusebius, his love of personas and masks, use of ciphers and sphinxes, and questioning of continuity and coherence in the piano music of the 1830s. In 'Hearing Selves', I delve more deeply into the musical features that make this sense of