

### Schumann's *Kinderszenen*

Despite its name, Robert Schumann's *Kinderszenen* ("Scenes from Childhood") was not written as a composition specifically for children. *Kinder*, German for "children," instead was meant to be an allusion to childhood, suggesting that the piece was about children and their lives, intended for adults to play as a recollection of their childhood. As a completed work of pieces for solo piano, *Kinderszenen* ended up being comprised of thirteen movements, each with its own unique title, like *Fürchtenmachen* ("Frightening"), *Wichtige Begebenheit* ("An Important Event"), and *Ritter vom Steckenpferd* ("The Knight of the Hobby-Horse"). In September 1840, Schumann described them as being "more cheerful, gentler, more melodic" than his previous compositions (Jensen, p. 162). These pieces were simple and unpretentious, no more than a page in length and they were quite different from previous works, like *Carnaval* or the later *Novelletten*, in content and structure. This is quite interesting in regard to *Novelletten* because it was meant to be an associated piece with *Kinderszenen*.

Like preceding pieces *Papillons*, *Davidsbundlertänze*, and *Carnaval*, *Kinderszenen* falls under the genre of character set, a genre through which Schumann's artistic and poetic identities tend to shine the most. Stylistically, the composition is characterized by simple melodies, extraordinary modulations, multi-faceted textures, unique gestures, tentative rhythmic patterns, quick mood changes, and a demand for piano proficiency. Despite this, *Kinderszenen* did not require virtuoso-like skills, and the average pianist could perform with little difficulty, promoting the claim from Anthony Newcomb that it may be "something of a serendipitous accident" (Hiser, 2008, p. 44).

The composition was originally written during a very troubling time for Schumann, as there was a lot of adversity in regard to his relationship with Clara Wieck; he may have written

the pieces in order to take himself back to a more carefree time: childhood; he was also rather fond of children. These factors, along with his love for Clara Wieck, were the foundational blocks for the composition's creation.

### **Conception and Cultural Background**

*Kinderszenen* was written in 1838 while Schumann was going through a difficult time in Vienna. Clara was on a concert tour from Germany to Paris, where she would stay for more than six months. In addition to this lengthy separation, her father, Friedrich Wieck, opposed their marriage. Schumann had completed his work on *Fantasie* and returned to writing shorter, cheerful works—a reflection of how he felt in regard to his and Clara's relationship. According to Schumann himself, in a letter to Clara, the idea for *Kinderszenen* originated from a comment she'd made. "Whether it was an echo of what you said to me once, 'that sometimes I seemed to you like a child', anyhow, I suddenly got an inspiration," he wrote (Taylor, 1990, p. 174). Schumann's childlike behavior could possibly be linked to his love for children. He was charmed by the "freshness, grace, and innocence of childhood" (Jensen, 2001, p. 162). The theme of childhood also seems to be a symbol of the return to the natural, poetic, and sublime soul of man in the romantic era; thus, Schumann was keen on translating that to his music.

There was no official dedicatee but based on correspondence between the two and Schumann's initial inspiration, it is clear that these pieces were written for Clara. In a letter from 1838, he even described the work as "light and gentle and happy like our future." He essentially gushed about his work, saying "the *Kinderszenen* will probably be finished when you arrive; I like them very much; I impress people a lot when I play them, especially myself" (Xu, 2006, p. 46).

Schumann had originally written thirty pieces for the composition and he managed to narrow it down to twelve: “Von fremden Ländern und Menschen,” “Kuriose Geschichte,” “Hasche-Mann,” “Bittendes Kind,” “Glückes genug,” “Wichtige Begebenheit,” “Träumerei,” “Am Kamin,” “Ritter vom Steckenpferd,” “Fast zu Ernst,” “Fürchtenmachen,” and “Kind im Einschlummern.” The thirteenth piece, “Der Dichter spricht” (“The Poet Speaks”) is thought by Timothy M. Taylor (1990, p. 174) to have been added as an epilogue or postscript, since the 12th piece (“Child Falling Asleep”) indicates the true end of a child’s day.

The cycle may have been narrowed down from thirty pieces, but none of this is from random selection; *Kinderszenen* is a unified and complete work; several factors work together to achieve this unity. One is the motive that comes from movement 1, Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (“About foreign lands and people”). This motive provides a “recurring thematic link” for the following pieces. This motivic link, along with shared structure and key scheme, represents Schumann’s typical style of this time, where many small pieces come together as a whole composition (Xu, 2006, p. 51). Another factor typical of Schumann was that the titles to these pieces were added after the composition was written in an effort to guide their interpretation by the public. Schumann started off as a poet, and he expresses his intentions for “Der Dichter spricht” as the motto for the entire cycle by referring to himself as a “poet and composer in one person” (Daverio, 1997, p. 30).

*Kinderszenen* had a dual purpose: in addition to bringing adults back to the carefree days of childhood, it actually represented a cultural movement taking place in Germany. This movement, called *Hausmusik* (“House music”), brought to question the social purpose of music and focused more on musical education and music in the home. Along with Schumann’s later child-related compositions, *Kinderszenen* functioned to combat boring virtuosity, but they

didn't achieve this in the same fashion. While the pieces for children provide examples of Schumann's pedagogical ideals, *Kinderszenen*, leans toward a more artistic and expressive purpose. It makes use of multi-voiced textures, overlapping hands, and unique gestures, among various other techniques. Pieces like *Kinderszenen* were difficult for composers of this time to write and release to the public because they were so personal and artistically unique. If one wasn't financially stable, they had to write commissions and focus on what the public wanted to hear. At this point, only composers that achieved economic independence were able to personalize their music and find "value for themselves as artists and their works" (Taylor, 1990, p. 170).

That said, Schumann initially faced quite a dilemma with releasing this piece as he was torn between two worlds: the artistic and the real. He wanted to uphold the ideals of his literary heroes, which meant the possibility of his pieces being rejected; on the other hand, he had to support his large family and the virtuosity genre provided a much shorter route to financial success. Schumann found his way around this dilemma by promoting anti-virtuosity. As a result, he managed to maintain his artistic ideals while still gaining money to support himself and his family. In this way, *Kinderszenen* represents both his artistic standards and his anti-virtuosity ideals in a composition that represents Schumann's dedication to the arts (Hiser, 2008, p. 117).

### **Noteworthy Features**

In addition to being a childhood piece not intended for children, *Kinderszenen* has quite a few unique aspects to it. From its place within Schumann's compositional history to its peculiar gestures and final movements, *Kinderszenen* is quite an interesting collection.

While most of Schumann's children/childhood related works come from later in his career, *Kinderszenen* was a product of the earlier end of his life as a composer. It is opus 15 of a

148-composition repertoire. His other pieces for children, *Album für die Jugend*, 12 *Klavierstücke für kleine und große Kinder*, and *Kinderball*, are opus 68, 85, and 130, respectively.

As previously mentioned, *Novelletten* has a close relationship to *Kinderszenen*. In early 1838, *Novelletten* and *Kinderszenen* were composed in rapid succession, along with *Kreiseriana*. Schumann had initially intended to publish the first two works together as a single collection; at this point in time, *Kinderszenen* was called *Kindergeschichten*, or “Children’s Tales.” This literary element connected it to *Novelletten* (“Novellettes”) and the former was meant to be the beginning of the latter. In the end, of course, Schumann decided to publish them separately.

In opposition to the genre of virtuosity, *Kinderszenen* boasts quite a few equivocal gestures that make the piece more difficult and complex than it seems and this brings a freshness to the normally conservative medium that is anti-virtuosic piano. Schumann’s poetic style permeates *Kinderszenen*, as a group of “striking aural experiences” (Hiser, 2008, p. 45) brought on by the composer’s use of discrete gestures throughout. The equivocal, poetic core of *Kinderszenen* is a common feature of Schumann’s character sets that distinguish them from pieces of the same genre. These gestures also lead the piece’s auditory effect to be strikingly different from the idea given by looking at the score. These hidden gestures found in each piece lead themselves more to artistic value than to technicality. An excellent example of this is “*Träumerei*,” the piece’s 7th and slowest movement. “*Träumerei*” uses a deceptive gesture that helps the performer convince the audience of their ability to play, despite the fact that the piece can’t be performed without conceding some of the note values. Despite its slow pace, this movement requires the most in legato passage work, so the same finger cannot play two adjacent

melody pitches. Many of the *Kinderszenen* pieces deserve three staves, yet the Schumann gave the performer one staff for each hand. Taking all of this into consideration, placing Schumann's piano repertoire on a difficulty continuum, with *Album für die Jugend* on one end and the *Paganini-Studien* on the other, *Kinderszenen* would be somewhere in the middle with other works like *Arabeske* and *Waldszenen* (Hiser, 2008 p. 102).

The penultimate movement of *Kinderszenen*, "Kind in Ein-schlummern," translates as "Child Falling Asleep," which gives the audience a sense that this is the end to the child's adventurous day depicted through the character set. Keeping with the key structure of the entire work, this movement is in E minor, while the first and 11th movements were in G major; however, Schumann brings a twist to the end of the movement by ending on A minor, rather than E. Schumann has used this technique before, in a different sense, with "Bittendes Kind." That movement is in D major all the way through only to end on its dominant and get resolved in the next movement, "Glückes genug." In ending a movement with a harmony outside the tonic, Schumann leads the audience to listen more intently to the next movement in order to see how the cadential dissonance will be resolved. (Taylor, 1990, p. 174). This is why nothing resolves in "Kind in Einschlummern," so listeners will pay more attention to the final movement "Der Dichter spricht."

Critic Theodor W. Adorno writes of a "true" subject of art, that speaks, and a "false." subject, that simply depicts. He believes that *Kinderszenen*'s original twelve movements are depiction, and "Der Dichter spricht" is not (Adorno, 1970). This movement is highly autonomous, and Schumann overcame this by putting himself into the piece by way of its title and making it separate from, yet connected to, the rest of *Kinderszenen* through various techniques. "Der Dichter spricht," or, "The Poet Speaks" is a sort of epilogue for the character set

that shows many of the trends from the end of the 18th to the start of the 19th centuries, like the rise of the genius, the virtuoso, the increasing importance of extramusical things like words and programs, and a new emphasis on individuality and originality. The last movement of *Kinderszenen* also makes one wonder: Why a poet and not a composer? The answer to this comes from Schumann's artistic history. He was a talented poet and musician and even struggled with deciding which to pursue professionally. Schumann's writings show a recurring use of the word "poet" to mean artists in general. One of the reasons Schumann referred to artists as poets was his, and many Romantics's belief in the interrelationship or the unification of the arts. So, when he used the word poet, he often meant an artist or genius, instead of the more precise use of the word. (Taylor, 1990, p. 169). All of this gives "Der Dichter spricht" the feeling of an epilogue meant to function as the creator's—in this case Schumann's—commentary.

### **Reception**

After struggling with public reception for some time, Schumann found a way to endear the public to his piano music in 1838 with *Kinderszenen* and it became his first commercially successful composition. It did, however, receive its share of criticism from the public. To some, *Kinderszenen* seemed unimportant and unworthy of taking seriously. Berlin critic Ludwig Rellstab of the *Vossische Zeitung*, was already prejudiced against Schumann and wrote in a review of that "Schumann had set upon his piano a howling child and sought to give a realistic imitation of its tones" (Xu, 2006, p. 47). This criticism spurred Schumann himself to respond and he wrote a letter to Heinrich Dorn saying:

"I have seldom met with anything so clumsy and commonplace as Rellstab's criticism of my *Kinderszenen*. He seems to think I call up in my imagination a screaming child, and fir the notes to it. It is just the other way about, but I will not deny that a vision of children's heads hunted me as I wrote. The inscriptions arose, of course, afterwards, and are really nothing more than tiny finger-posts to the interpretation and conception. But

Rellstab, really, hardly goes beyond the ABC of music at times; chords are the only thing he understands.” (Schumann, 1971, Letter 56).

Of course, *Kinderszenen* received a lot of positive attention as well. In 1839, the year before they met personally, Franz Liszt wrote Schumann about how his daughter “clamored for these pieces, of which she never tired” (Xu, 2006, p. 21). He wrote: "Two or three times a week ... I play your Kinderszenen to her [my daughter] in the evening; this enchants her, and me still more, as you can imagine" (Perényi, 1974, p. 135). The piece was also adored by perhaps the only person whose opinion truly mattered: Clara. The piece’s unofficial dedicatee loved the *Kinderszenen*, telling Schumann that they "belonged only to us" in a letter from March of 1839 (Xu, 2006, p. 46). She went on further to say, “they are always on my mind; they are so simple, warm, so quite like you; I can’t wait till tomorrow when I can play them again.”

### **Conclusion**

Schumann’s character pieces and piano music for children represent initial examples of a genre that became a trademark for him and *Kinderszenen* became the most famous of his pieces about childhood, even as the only piece not necessarily meant to be played by children. These pieces showcase Schumann’s musical imagination at its most poetic point. As one of the three projects that he worked on that year, *Kinderszenen* was the composer’s coping mechanism for the separation from his beloved fiancée, Clara.

It is a unique piece that tells a story by the use of many small touches. “Bittendes Kind,” (“Pleading Child”), for instance is resolved harmonically when an unseen force seems to give in and grant the child’s wish at the start of the next movement, “Glückes genug” (“Quite Happy”). The child’s day continues on through to the 12th movement, “Kind in Ein schlummern,” which functions as the end of the child’s day as they fall asleep. The final movement, “Der Dichter spricht,” functions as a narrative view of the child and all of the themes and feelings from the

previous 12 movements are recalled and closed out with the same G major key in which the entire piece began.

Clearly, music was more than a form of entertainment to Schumann; rather, it was a vehicle for storytelling and the higher power of poetry. "How I reveled and dreamt, as I wrote them," Schumann once said in a letter to Clara. "And if you ask me, whether your thoughts about it are also mine, then I think with delight: Yes, they are. What I shyly poeticized perhaps reality will bring us ..." (McCallum, 2010, p. 5). In response to his thoughts and his daydreams, Schumann claims to have "poeticized" *Kinderszenen*, not composed—or "wrote" it.

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