

## Robert Schumann

Schumann was born in Zwickau in Germany, in 1810.

He started studying piano at the age of 7, and was composing shortly after that. He loved poetry and literature, his father being a bookseller. At the age of 16, with the death of his father and sister, he went to the University of Leipzig to study law, but was soon turning all his time to music.

In 1830, Schumann boarded with the Wieck family, and was studying piano with Friedrich Wieck. A hand injury unfortunately prevented him from becoming a career piano soloist, so he turned to composing and music criticism.

In 1834, he founded the *New Journal for Music*. He was editor, and had opinions about what he considered shallow music of the times. It is said that his publications and his journal helped the Romantic movement to progress forward.

By 1835, Robert Schumann had fallen in love with Clara Wieck, his former teacher's daughter (now aged 16). After a battle with Clara's father that reached the courts, they married in 1840. In this year, Robert wrote over 130 songs, and in 1836 his first 2 symphonies were performed!

In the 1840s, Schumann became more influenced by JS Bach's style, and advised others to "study the masters". He said *"let the Well-Tempered Clavier (a keyboard album by Bach) be your daily bread and you will certainly become a fine musician"* (*History of Western Music, Grout, p.377*).

During these years, Schumann began to suffer from mental illness. In 1843, Mendelssohn (who had then recently founded the Leipzig Conservatory) offered Schumann a professorship in piano and composition. By 1848, Schumann did continue to conduct, but left Leipzig. In 1854, Schumann threw himself into the Rhine river, as he was in a very depressed state. He was rescued, and then sent to an asylum in Bonn, where he died in 1856.

## Schumann's Piano Concerto

All of Schumann's published pieces before 1840 were for piano!

He wrote only 3 longer works for piano:

*Fantasia in C major*, op.17 (1836), *Symphonic Etudes* (1834) which is a set of variations, and his only *Piano Concerto* (1845).



Most of his piano music consists of short character pieces which are grouped in cycles with names such as *Carnaval* and *Papillons*.

He also wrote an *Album for the Young* in 1848.

Schumann only wrote one other concerto, a cello concerto in A major (1850). (It is interesting that the piano concerto is in A minor)

Schumann's piano pieces are nearly always based on short themes that are developed through several different harmonies. It has been said that the "turning" of the harmonies and the way they then affect the main melodies reflects Schumann's "troubled" mind! He did once describe his own *Fantasia in C* to his wife Clara as a "long complaint"!

Schumann broke away from classical forms (like the rondo in Mozart's aria) and instead his pieces became very personal journeys through the music, with fragmented ideas and a tremendous amount of originality. The Piano Concerto is extremely satisfying to play from the piano soloist's point of view. It is well-written for the piano, lying nicely under your hands. It has exciting harmonies throughout the piece, and a satisfying A minor tonic end which is positively all-triumphant (even though it is a minor key).

## Schumann: Examining the Score

Look at the first page of Schumann's *Piano Concerto*.

1. Name the instruments in English
2. If you compare this instrumentation with the modern-day full symphony orchestra (as used in the piece by Gareth Farr, for instance) which instruments are "missing"?
3. Comment on the relationship of the piano part on this page to the rest of the orchestral parts.
4. What do you notice if you look at just the woodwind section parts or just the string section parts?
5. What is the texture of the piano part here, and why do you think the composer has chosen that texture for the start of the piece?
6. Is the piano playing the first important melody or "theme" of this piece or something else? How do you know?
7. How many players are there in the woodwind and brass sections of this orchestra?
8. Given that this piece is in the key of A minor, what is so special about the chords in the string parts in bars 3-4?

## Schumann: Examining the Score: ANSWERS

Look at the first page of Schumann's *Piano Concerto*.

1. Name the instruments in English

*2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 French horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, piano, violin 1 & 2, viola, cello, Double bass*

2. If you compare this instrumentation with the modern-day full symphony orchestra (as used in the piece by Gareth Farr, for instance) which instruments are "missing"?

*Trombones, tuba, auxiliary percussion, harp, piccolo, cor anglais, bass clarinet, contrabassoon. Usually 4 French horns.*

3. Comment on the relationship of the piano part on this page to the rest of the orchestral parts.

*The piano is featured, with the strings reinforcing the piano's strong chords/cadences. Woodwind acts as a separate group, contrasting with the piano statement.*

4. What do you notice if you look at just the woodwind section parts or just the string section parts?

*They are all playing in the same rhythm: homophonic*

5. What is the texture of the piano part here, and why do you think the composer has chosen that texture for the start of the piece?

*Homophonic - makes a bold statement to start the piece*

6. Is the piano playing the first important melody or "theme" of this piece or something else? How do you know?

*The piano is only playing a flamboyant introduction, as there is no individual melodic line but just big blocks of chords*

7. How many players are there in the woodwind and brass sections of this orchestra?

*Woodwind - 8, brass - 4, total 12*

8. Given that this piece is in the key of A minor, what is so special about the chords in the string parts in bars 3-4?  
*They form a perfect cadence in A minor (E7, Am)*

### Schumann's style

There are 3 themes that appear in homophonic texture in Schumann's *Piano Concerto*. If you have a score, you can see them from bars 12, bars 31-2 and bars 47-8. The development of these themes happens in polyphonic textures. This means that the original statement of the themes are clear and easy to hear, and then with the development they become more interwoven, complex and interesting!

There are several piano figurations that recur. They are:

- Homophonic texture, piano playing chords with the same rhythm in both hands (as in the first few bars)
- Melody in left hand of piano, with arpeggio accompaniment in the right hand (e.g. bar 21)
- Piano just playing a bassline in the left hand and arpeggios in the right hand - having purely an harmonic role and not playing the melody (e.g. bar 30)
- Unison octaves (e.g. bar 40)
- Melody in the right hand of the piano, with left hand arpeggio accompaniment (e.g. bar 105)
- Sustained chords in the left hand, with broken arpeggios in the right hand - piano in an accompanying role (e.g. bar 122 fol)

There are also sections where the piano has the melody in the middle of its range, with a bassline under and arpeggios over it!

### **Special features:**

- Diminished chords in arpeggios over 6 octaves! These are used to extend the themes. Try playing this yourself (see bar 354-5)
- Chromaticism in the melody and harmony. Schumann's 1<sup>st</sup> theme in tonic A minor uses the non-scale notes of Bb, D# & C# within the space of 8 bars! Accidentals create more interest and colour, and are a feature of Romantic music.

- Piano part features throughout the whole piece, and is not really sitting in the background at any stage!

### Writing your own Piano Concerto!

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Compose a simple 4 or 8-bar melody in treble clef in A minor (or another key of your choosing).

Make it catchy and easy to remember - test it out by playing it to someone and seeing if they can play or sing it back to you!

If they can't, then it's not memorable enough to base a whole piece around!

Look at Schumann's *Piano Concerto* melodies for inspiration.

The main melody has the following features:

- Balances ascent and descent: is undulating in shape
- Has a sequence: bars 3-4 and bars 1-2 higher with a different ending!
- The range is quite big - just over an octave
- There is an octave leap in bar 5 (from a1 to a2) and this gives the melody excitement and expression!
- Tied notes make the rhythm interesting. Ties across the bar avoid emphasis on the beat
- Quavers near the end of phrases lead to longer notes in the next bar - this drives momentum across the barline

Now, write your own memorable melody.

When your melody is finished, harmonize it with some simple chords. Stick to one or two chords a bar. It may help you to work out what chords I, II, III, IV, V & VI are in your chosen key as

they will be your most likely choices. The best way to harmonise your tune is through experimenting. Long notes or notes on strong beats of the bar should ideally be part of the triad of your chosen chord harmony underneath. A friend can play your melody while you try out chords underneath, if you can't play both parts at once.

Now that you have a melody harmonised, enter it into the *Sibelius* notation programme (or similar) in piano score.

NOW, add into the score all the other orchestral instruments that are used in Schumann's piano concerto.

Look at the list of piano figurations previous, and break your theme up into bits for the piano some of those ways - e.g. put your melody into the bass clef of the piano and have the chords played in arpeggios in the right hand. Try 3 or 4 versions of the theme in this way.

Add String chords for effect, as on page 1 of the Schumann score, to support important moments in your melody.

Add Woodwind section theme statements and variants between your piano versions of the theme.

You are now writing the start of a piano concerto like Schumann's! If you can, try giving the tune to the violins or oboes, and figure out what the piano will do then - there's a world of possible combinations, isn't there?! 😊