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Politics, literature, people In Schumann's op.136

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Hoc opus, hic labor est (Virgilio)

In previous articles¹ I have tried to isolate some of the elements of which Schumann's mind was composed. Now I try to show how, from the same elements, his music was composed.

He himself once described the reaction thus:² "Everything that happens in the world affects me, politics, literature, people; I think it all over in my own way, and then it has to find an outlet in music". Appendix I suggests how this equation applies to the overture *Hermann und Dorothea*, op 136, written in December 1851.³ What follows is an attempt to describe the process stage by stage.

First, what in the world was happening to affect Schumann? His diary reads: "19.12.51. finished rescoring the symphony;⁴ began the overture. 20.12.51. finished the overture." The symphony was the D minor, written some ten years before.⁵ Schumann had then said that it would be called "Clara"; and that in it he would depict his young wife, whom he had just married despite parental opposition. Hermann and Dorothea, in Goethe's epic verse-*idyll*, marry despite parental opposition. Now that story, which Schumann was considering as a possible source for a libretto, is set against the background of the French Revolution; and as he was reading it in his home in Düsseldorf there came from Paris the news of Louis-Napoleon's *coup d'état*. So in December 1851 he had two special reasons for thinking about France and about revolution.

Each of these concepts had already been expressed separately in his work by the *Marseillaise*.⁶ So now their double reinforcement comes marching back into the forefront of his mind, to be re-embodied as music. Of this overture's 265 bars, about 40 quote from the *Marseillaise*; and the first edition has a vague explanatory note about its supposed relevance to Goethe.

So much for politics in music; now for people. There was only one other person in the world for Schumann. He had no need of special reasons to think of his adored wife, to whom, for some 20 years now, his life as well as his music had been dedicated. But as it happened there *were* two special reasons in December 1851, as we have seen; first the rescoring of the "Clara" symphony, and then the reminder of their own love-story in Goethe. Of the group of themes that Schumann used to symbolize Clara⁷ two of the most typical are the B minor/G major forms.



X in various keys is almost the entire thematic material of the symphony; Y is the running theme of the piano work in B minor; G major which tells the story of their love, estrangement, reconciliation and marriage.⁸ All the old memories come singing back. The overture begins with X in B minor and moves into Y in G major. Of its 265 bars another 40 are clearly based on these themes; and the first edition bears the inscription "to his dear Clara" the first avert dedication for many years.

Politics and people, then: and they are linked by literature. All his life, Schumann was a man of letters in a rather special sense. Not only does he depict people and ideas in music, but he names them; and the

¹ MT Feb and Aug 1965; May and Dec 1966; Feb 1967

² Letter to Clara Wieck 13.4.38 (in *Jugendbriefe*, 1886)

³ first published 1857 as no 1 of the posthumous works in the composer's own piano solo, piano duet and orchestral versions (but which came first?)

⁴ to its detriment, some think: see fn 13

⁵ but left unpublished (why?)

⁶ eg in *Die Grenadiere* op 49 no 1 (1840) and the revolutionary march op 76 no 4 (1849)

⁷ MT May 1966 pp.395-6

⁸ op 6, cf Roger Fiske, MT Aug 1964; the same theme begins eg op 24 no 2, op 48 no 5

names and notions are not only spoken but spelled out letter by letter.⁹ We know that he thought of characters, including Goethe's Egmont and Clärchen, as symbols for Robert and Clara.¹⁰ Goethe's Hermann and Dorothea, to judge from the music of this overture¹¹ are even less than symbols; indeed, hardly more than ciphers.


I have already suggested how these names were enciphered in the music.¹² Appendix II sets out in greater detail the system apparently used. It would represent the last stage of a system of composition, as of a composer, whose more obvious possibilities had been exhausted. It may seem eccentric, but it has a meticulous logic of its own. We recall that "a quack and pedant" was what Bernard Shaw called the later Schumann, blaming his "restless intellect". And indeed it does seem that his brain may already have been affected by the disorder which was to cost him first his reason and then his life in only a few more years.¹³ Meanwhile the cipher was as alert and helpful as ever. First, Hermann (see Appendix II) gives G, Db, G, Cb, A#, Db (bis). Play those notes, and they insist on B minor; the sound is G, C#, G, B, A#, C#. , But that still does not yield a viable theme; and the 1851 Schumann needed one. Suppose the name is not only spelt but spoken, as in the piano music which called and cried for Clara?¹⁴ Add the spondee rhythm of "Hermann" to the first

cipher note, with a rising inflexion:

repeat with the second:

and the third:

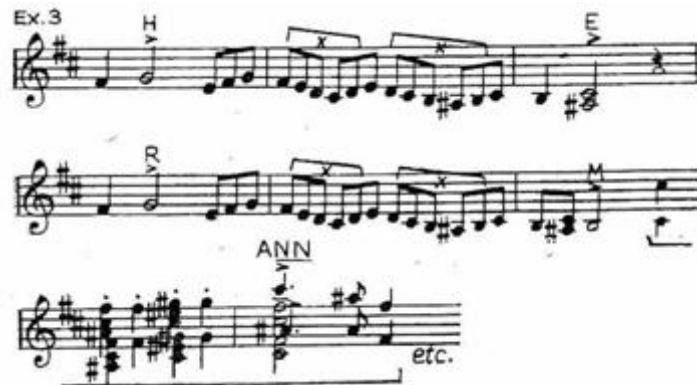
and the fourth:



Ex. 2

Hermann

Mix in the Clara theme X in its D minor symphony form¹⁵ and there is a complete idea ready to serve. That leaves the *Marseillaise* - and the cipher notes A# and C# - demanding attention. So it is played in F sharp major, presented as the dominant of B minor. The result thus far:



Ex. 3

ANN
etc.

⁹ eg A-B-E-G-G (1831); A-S-C-H/As-C-H-/S-C-H-A, etc (1834); B-E-D-A (1837); E-H-E (1838, 1840); H (1840); G-A-D-E (1843); G-A-D-E-A-De(1844); B-A-C-H (1845); A-C-H (1847); G-A-D-E (1848); F-A-E (1853)

¹⁰ Clärchen was a pet name for Clara; cf also Hero and Leander, Sarazen and Sarazene (suggested titles for two *Novellettes*), Pantalon et Colombine etc.

¹¹ It is never performed; and no critic has a good word to say about it-indeed the only study of it in the literature is actually called "On a dull overture by Schumann" (Gerald Abraham, *Monthly Musical Record*, 1946); see also fn 13.

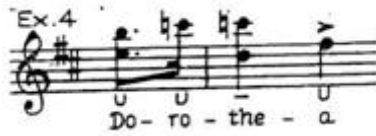
¹² MT Aug 1965, ex 19: as successive accented notes in the treble clef in the first and second subjects of Schumann's piano duet version (1857). The British Museum has a copy of this, but not of the 1857 piano solo version, which might be equally interesting

¹³ according to Drs Slater and Meyer (*Confinia psiquiatrica*, 1959, vol II no 2) the diagnosis that best fits the facts is a specific form of syphilitic disease of the brain with organic changes very possibly making their first effects felt at about this time, followed by the outbreak of a florid psychosis (general paresis) from 1854

¹⁴ MT May 1966 p.395

¹⁵ Dr Mosco Carner in a penetrating analysis of the orchestral music (*Schumann: a symposium*, 1952) draws attention to this resemblance

In contrast with the more austere Hermann, Dorothea must be soft and sweet, *piano* and dolce, an excellent thing in second subjects. She too would speak her name melodiously; and again rhythm and inflexion added to the first cipher note make a theme (bars 42-3):



So again the symbol comes to life, less Dorothea than Galatea, and more Clara than either. This time her themes X and Y are used as foreground melody (bars 50-2. 71-2). Again successive accented notes spell out the name (Appendix II); again we hear the *Marseillaise* (bars 84-85).

Ex. 5

FROM SPECIAL KEY 1.

	H	E	R	M	A	NN
	= G \flat	D \flat	G \flat	C \flat	A \sharp	D \flat

Accented notes in treble clef (1st subject)

BAR 1 3 4 6 8 8

FROM SPECIAL KEY 2.

	D	O	R	O	T	H	E	A
	= F \sharp	E \flat	G \flat	E \flat	B \flat	D \sharp	A \flat	

Accented notes in treble clef (2nd subject onwards)

BAR 43 45 61 75 77 79 84

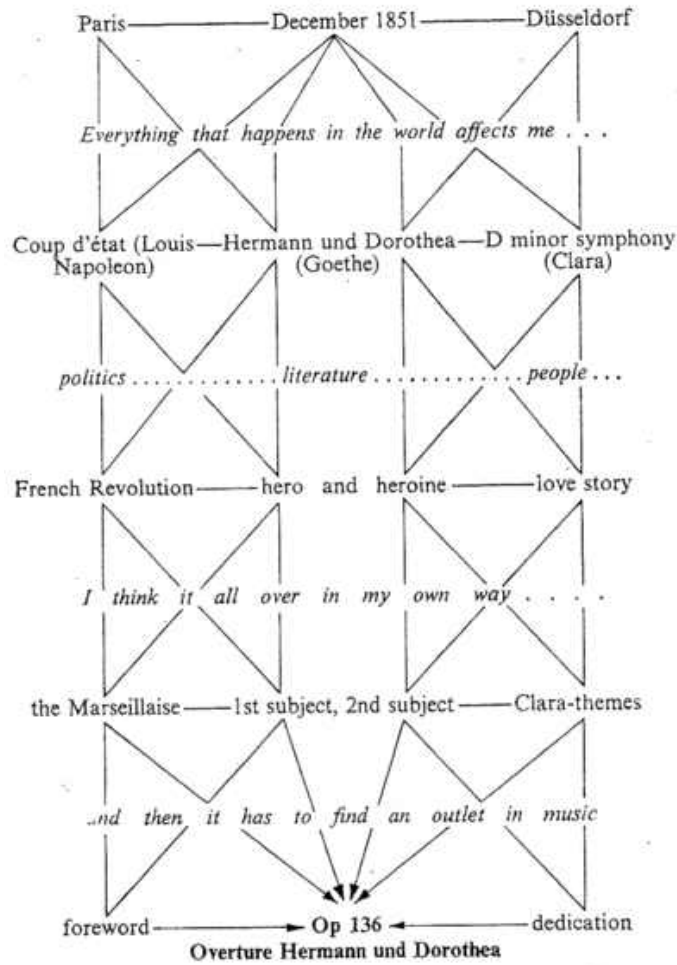
Finally, the elements of which this overture is composed seem to have been weighed out in the necessary proportions by even stranger measures. The first or "Hermann" section is just over 41 ½ bars, while the second or "Dorothea" section is just over 324 - exactly the ages in years of Robert and Clara Schumann in late December 1851.

*

Politics, literature and people, then, just as Schumann said; and, as he did not say, ciphering perhaps in both senses. So calculated a procedure is not calculated to inspire; and by common consent this opus is laboured, indeed contrived. But, if so, it will be by means that could make a masterpiece in Schumann's prime.¹⁶ The difference is that from 1851 onwards the music is letter rather than spirit. Ideally, the two belong together, sound and symbol in one, "the distilled quintessence of the life of the spirit", as Schumann knew at 18. As scientists now know, the essence of life itself is transmitted as symbol, by a description encoded at molecular level in genes. There seems to be no widespread rejection of life on that account; on the contrary, its awe and mystery are enhanced. Perhaps the same principle might hold good for Schumann's music; the image always of his own life, and often of mankind's.

¹⁶ This is offered as a verifiable statement of fact, which can be tested by a dispassionate and detailed study of how the A-S-C-H As-C-H cipher notes actually function in *Carnaval op 9*

Appendix I



Appendix II

General Key	{ D I Q	H J R	A K S	B L T	C M U	E N V	F O W	G P X	} etc
Musical Notes	F	G	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Special Key	1. b	♯	♯	♯	b	b	♯	♯	
	2. ♯	b	♯	b	♯	♯	♯	b	

The general key was, as it happened, deduced from Schumann's other music. Furthermore - as interested readers can verify for themselves - it could have been deduced from op 136 alone. A process of logical inference from the sole assumption that the two names are enciphered in first and second subjects discloses the entire general and special systems above together with the further information that the cipher is phonetic, and reads upwards (*ie* from left to right like writing) where two cipher notes coincide.

Each special key conforms with Schumann's known method of permutation (as found in an early notebook, together with other calculations explicable by reference to Johann Klüber's *Kryptographik*, 1809).

There is one discrepancy; the second O of Dorothea should have given E, not E sharp (F). This could have resulted from an inadvertent use of the wrong key (cryptographers know how easy that is) or (perhaps less probably) it might have been

changed, for musical reasons. Against that discrepancy we have to balance the interesting fact that the last three cipher notes correspond not only in pitch but in actual notation to what is found in the music; B fiat, D sharp, A natural - a sequence of accented notes rather rare in B minor.

All this has to be seen against a background of the total mathematical probability: (a) that a cipher system could, by pure chance, be objectively and independently deducible from quite different sources in Schumann's music; (b) that any key; however arrived at, would correspond note for note, by pure chance, with a predetermined sequence of letters. This latter probability is calculable; as interested readers can confirm, the odds against chance may be put conservatively as 200,000,000 to 1.