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Schumann and Faust

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Schumann's name has always been linked with Heine's. Yet that affair lasted only a few months, while Goethe remained a lifelong love. This began rather shyly. At 18, Schumann confessed that he could not understand Goethe, an impression confirmed by his warmly melodramatic setting (1829) of that coolest of lyrics, *Der Fischer*. As ever, the poem is used for expressive purposes. So, when Schumann inscribed "Meine Ruh' ist hin" (the opening lines of Gretchen's lament for her lover Faust) over the middle section of his 1832 Intermezzo op.4 no.2, it testified more to his interest in Clara Wieck than to his interest in literature. It was his own peace of mind that had vanished.

No doubt the warmth of this feeling helped to ripen his appreciation of Goethe. A letter to Clara in 1838 quotes two love-poems from the *Westöstlicher Divan*, while Schumann's own writings throughout the 1830s show knowledge of the other lyrics, ballads and dramas. But the most frequent references are to *Egmont*, because its heroine was Clärchen (an affectionate name for Clara); literature remained a looking-glass. Other equally faithful reflections are the lighthearted or serene *Diwan* songs of 1840 and the tragic or distraught *Wilhelm Meister* songs of 1849. Two faces look out at us from those frames; the mature or worldweary man, an innocent defenceless girl. Just such another Goethe source, *Hermann und Dorothea*, engaged Schumann's mind between 1846 and 1853; the overture of the latter year, the sole survivor of a large-scale dramatic campaign, is dedicated "to his dear Clara".

Similarly, the *Faust* music (1844-53) conforms to this Schumannian pattern of feeling, introverted to the point of beginning with Faust's end and closing with an overture. The latter should have been a culminating masterpiece, with powerfully symbolic thematic contrasts of tragic hero and tender heroine, sinful life and redeeming love. But the music is audibly clouded, no doubt with a foreshadowing of brain syphilis. The tragedy had become reality.

There is tragic irony too. At 17, presumably not long before the first fatal infection, Schumann had written to a school-friend: "We have all been given nicknames; mine is Faust, although I didn't want it to be". He would have earned that name while rehearsing Faust's monologue, which he recited at a private concert early in 1828. No wonder that Thomas Mann in his *Dr Faustus* turned instinctively to Schumann with his ciphers and syphilis as the main musico-biographical model for all archetypal hero, the German composer who sacrifices himself body and brain so that his music might have life more abundantly.

If then Faust came both first and last in the Schumann story, why did the music start so late and take so long? For years it bore the wrong character; the simple and lowly Gretchen was no match for the incomparable Clara. Further, *Faust I* would need stage music; and Schumann's dramatic flair was slow to kindle. Even at the risk of dullness his lyric genius would have to begin with *Faust II*, which is all verse and no play. But that was not published until after Goethe's death in 1832; it would take many years to absorb and assimilate; and its heavily symbolic texture would remain opaque to any musician lacking the technical equipment to generate the required power and intensity. So first Schumann had to complete his long apprenticeship to the lyric piano (1830-9) and then master vocal music (1840), orchestral music (1841), and chamber music (1842).

All that range and depth then culminated in 1843 in the massive anticlimax of *Paradies und die Peri*. The German text is a crassly saccharine sob-story of guilt and redemption, though with hardly any other redeeming feature. Schumann thought it his best music to date; but it was his first music to date. It speaks all too clearly of his own aspirations and anxieties and the strains they imposed on him. *Faust* too was first conceived during this sterile period. In early 1844, Schumann's diary records the reading of Goethe's Part II, "albeit with an effort". Soon he was loyally attending his wife on her triumphant Russian tour. The departure from his home and routine, his own modest status and acclaim compared with the receptions accorded to Clara, his well-founded anxieties about his health - - all these exacerbated in already grave neurasthenia.

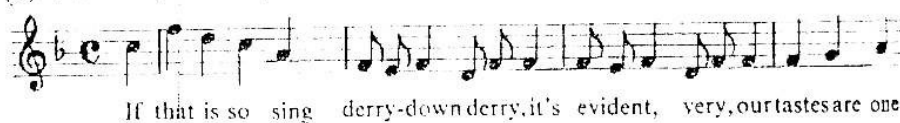
On his return Schumann recovered sufficiently to compose, or complete, nos. 1, 2 and 3, and the first version of no.7, of what is now Part III of his *Faust* scenes. Nos.4, 5 and 5 are usually ascribed to 1848; but there are stylistic and textual grounds for supposing that Part II was complete, at least in outline, by summer 1844. It offers a self-contained unity inspired by the idea of Faust's (i.e. Schumann's) redemption and transfiguration, in a reunion with his loved one at the same exalted level. Of course, the work goes beyond mere wish-fulfilment; as always, Schumann strove to make his own experience speak and act for mankind. But the struggle taxed his strength. By October 1844

illimitable soaring heights. Yet the actual sounds were perhaps not meant to be uppermost. The orchestral effects were certainly secondary. Thus Schumann wrote to Liszt saying that if there were no harp in Weimar a grand piano would do (one can imagine Liszt's reaction to both implications). Schumann was concerned with symbolic material; it is not his fault if this has been found to fade. His whole concept of the secular oratorio was built on the apparently steadfast foundation of church music. But hymns may now sound more ancient than modern. The melodies and textures which then seemed as fire-new and immortal as the reborn Faust himself have quietly smouldered away, through a thousand forgotten cantatas, into ashes which one scans in vain for a phoenix. The shining example has become a burnt-out case. Worse still, this idiom has become so trivialized as to sound self-parodistic. Music analysts (to whom all things are possible) might even point to parallels between two ways of being led on by the Eternal Womanly – (a) that of Faust by Gretchen, and (b) that of Ko-Ko by Katisha (ex.2).

Ex. 2 (a) Schumann, c. 1847



(b) Sullivan, c. 1884



Thus it will take total commitment to make the Faust music sound even earnest, let alone exalted. Yet this must surely be the aim – as witness the major works written between the 1848 rehearsal of Part III and its première of 1849, namely the music for Byron's *Manfred*. Again we find the same obsession with sexual transgression, remorse and final release. Byron's hero is a mini-Faust, all the more vehement for being smaller in stature. He fears but defies blindness, vertigo, madness and death; he is haunted and hounded by guilt and shame; his soul is wrestled over by good and evil spirits; but he is at last allowed to find his own peace, and a portion of immortality. All this was, quite literally, Schumann's own recorded personal experience. Further, the *Manfred* music coincided with the revolutionary year in Europe which had so excited Schumann's own sympathies. But when in May 1849 it was Dresden's turn for revolution, he sought the stillness of the surrounding countryside - while Wagner was active at the barricades. Schumann may have felt that at least his music could, as it were by proxy, play a progressive and Wagnerian part in the great national drama. Meanwhile he read *Faust* again; and later, safely back in Dresden, wrote revolutionary marches and Goethe settings. The *Wilhelm Meister* songs of that summer are elaborately motivic; the *Faust* garden scene which followed in mid-July has a new flexibility of declamation. Even more striking is the curious motivic symbolism of the two other contemporary *Faust* scenes which go to make Part I.

In no.2, Gretchen prays to the Virgin for help and comfort. Only the Mater- Dolorosa can see into her heart. That heart, she cries, is breaking within her; "Das Herz zerbricht in mir". The last two words are unwarrantably segregated by a bar-line and a minim rest (ex.3). This is not as unmotivated as it

Ex. 3



sounds. Under that breaking heart, as the Evil Spirit taunts in the next scene, lies her unborn child, already ominously quickening. Its presence ("Gegenwart") is a musical synonym for "in mir" (ex.4). This

Ex. 4



simple but pregnant motif accompanies Gretchen's plea to be unburdened from her thoughts, and recurs at the Evil Spirit's ill-natured prophecy that sin and shame will not remain hidden much longer (ex.5), which is itself anticipated by Gretchen's earlier clamour to be saved from shame and death (ex.6).



The wailing semitones that warned of Mignon's tragedy in the *Wilhelm Meister* songs here foretell Gretchen's travail. The cry is a lament for Faust's child. The music knows that she will be its death, and it hers. This small-scale, short-breathed conception is typical of Schumann's motivic procedures from 1849 on; the ends become more and more ambitious, the means less and less so.

Similarly, in the cathedral scene a plain chord is stretched to breaking point by an added weight of meaning. As Gretchen prays for air and light she is again mocked by the Evil Spirit; and the questioning dominants so often heard in the song-music are reinforced with diminished 7ths bearing the rhetorical sense of "Air? Light? For such as you?". The harmony questions, underlines, italicizes, as it were editorially (ex.7).



In the same month (July 1849) the over-excited and labile Schumann (at times "very well", at others "very ill", according to his diary) proceeded straight to the composition of what is now Part II. It begins with the same scene as Goethe's, in the open air and in the typically vernal or rural key of B flat. This time tonality and rhythm are to be used as principles of construction. Soon the two-bar phrases of 3/4 are strangely metamorphosed into 4/4, with an added voice part (ex.8). The hovering attendant elves are buoyed on rising woodwind (x). Next the tonality mellows into G flat major at the mention of night.



Over the whole canvas the music is mixed and applied like paint, to match the colour and outline of the verbal ideas. The B flat predictably returns in a briskly coursing 6/8 at the mention of hunting, which soon darkens to Schumann's ominous E flat minor for the stormy onrush of time and fate. New keys open new vistas; thus the transition to G major, at the words "Des Lebens Pulse schlagen frisch lebendig", moving through E minor to E major for Faust's hymn of homage to the twin powers of life and nature, tells us much about Schumann's private associations with these tonalities. There follows a rich profusion and variety of rhythmic figures and key-change, by means of which the incidental music can be related to actual incidents. In no.5, composed (or completed) in the following year (1850), Faust sees the secret grey and midnight hags, Want, Guilt, Need and Care. They pass a rich man's house, where the first three can find no entry. But Sorge, the master spy, can worm in anywhere. Schumann was always open to such haunting visitations, from Guilt as well as Care. His witches, a respectful perversion of Mendelssohn's

fairies, sound all too familiar. For the purer atmosphere of Faust's noble soliloquy his inspiration draws on the more rarefied airs of *Genoveva*. Next comes the strangest of dramatic ironies. Faust, blinded by Care, hears lire sound of spades and shovels. This is made by evil spirits busily digging his grave. But he takes it for the beginning of his great work of land-reclamation- that communal striving for a new and better world which was no doubt also Schumann's own ideal. Thus deluded, Faust attains perfect bliss, and there-by forfeits his own life, which is duly claimed by Mephistopheles; and the curtain falls on Schumann's *Faust* scenes, with the end of his Part II.

This part, according to Bernard Shaw, is the summit of Schumann's achievement in dramatic music, and hence far superior to the rest of the work. Admirers of Schumann's lyric genius will tank the first part of that judgement far superior to the second. But there will be no two views about the overture. With Faust dead, The music sounds posthumous. One should hardly be surprised to find Faust's name and Gretchen's enciphered on the music like epitaphs, in the first and second subjects respectively, by some private system of Schumann's own.

Much has been said about the work's unity and its relation to Goethe. It seems really to have little enough of either in any ordinary sense. There is no evidence that Schumann conceived his *Faust* scenes as a whole, or that he wished them to be so presented. He never heard them thus performed; He never even saw them so published. There is no coherence in the orchestration, which audibly dates from two different periods (hand-horns in Part III, valve-horns elsewhere) and might benefit from judicious rescoring if the parts are to be brought together. Again, the essence of Goethe's masterpiece can hardly be definitively conveyed by a musical setting of some five per cent of the text; so all such large claims as "really Goethe's Faust" or "truly Goethe's Gretchen" can safely be dismissed as vacuous. Nor will it do to pretend that Schumann is even ordinarily perceptive about his poet. He treats the text crassly throughout (just as in the songs of this period), omitting rhyming lines and making other inept changes. He ignores obvious verbal points, such as the significant pause expected before "Tod" in no.5, or Goethe's deliberate cross-reference from "Neige, neige" in Part III back to "Ach, neige" in Part I. Such ideas as the simultaneous singing of separate stanzas (by the Magna Peccatrix, the Mulier Samaritana and Maria Aegyptiaca in Part III) could hardly have occurred to anyone setting the poem for its own sake.

Yet it was said by Schumann - and this gave him particular pleasure - that his music helped people to understand Goethe better. This was his ambition, this his inspiration. In a sense, both were realized. One clue is to be found in a review he wrote in 1838. In discussing a chamber work by Hirschbach which was inscribed with quotations from *Faust*, Schumann compares the composer to "a necromancer showing us his life in phantom figures of the imagination". It is no mere chance, but natural selection, that makes each part of Schumann's *Faust begin* with a heightened awareness of the natural scene and end in a loss of consciousness. We move from the garden to Gretchen's swoon; from the forest to Faust's death; from the mountains to their joint transfiguration. Thus the characters and themes thrice begin in the outside world and thrice make a journey to the interior. The music seeks to articulate and elucidate the meaning of life itself, no less, from matter to spirit. Despite evil and despair, it says, despite sin and death, humankind shall prevail; "for we shall after all make a fair conclusion to this brief music that is man", as Olaf Stapledon once wrote in an outburst of highly Schumannian sentiment.

It might all seem mere sentimentality, were it not for Schumann's own saving fortitude in the direst adversity. His *Faust*, that most secular of oratorios, is what Nietzsche called the typical Saxon combination of humanism and religious rationalism. It retains Christian musical form, but extracts and replaces the content. So for some hearers it will ring false and hollow; for others, full and true.