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Schumann's hand injury *Some further evidence*

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In an earlier article (MT, Dec 1971) I offered a new theory about the paralysis reported by Schumann in 1830. At first a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, it gradually blotted out all prospects of a virtuoso career. I suggested that he might have used a machine of some kind as a cure (and then blamed it when things got worse), but that the real cause was related to the syphilis from which, on impressive medical testimony, Schumann suffered most of his life. A link between syphilis and hand weakness is mercury, which treats the former but causes the latter. It also causes hand tremor, from which Schumann also suffered; and his main treatment was one recommended for paralysis caused by gout (which can be ruled out) or *metal poisoning*.

Soon after that article was published, I heard from Professor Alan Walker of McMaster University about some relevant correspondence found among the Leipzig state archives in 1967 by their Director, Dr Manfred Unger, and his staff archivist Peter Beyer, and discussed in a dissertation of that year by Flans-Joachim Rothe¹ for a copy of which I am obliged to the music library of the city of Leipzig; its quotation of the original material is my source for what follows.

Under a law of June 1840 Schumann was liable for service in the municipal guard. His appeal for exemption took the authorities a year to determine. During that time he submitted two medical affidavits from his friend Dr Reuter, dated January 1841 and February 1842. These explain that Schumann was a virtuoso pianist as a boy, but as a young man first noticed that the index and middle fingers of the right hand had far less power and flexibility, than the others. The use of a finger-strengthening device whereby the two fingers were pulled and held hard down to the back of the hand had, according to Dr Reuter, led to further deterioration: so that by 1842 these fingers had been quasi-paralysed for more than ten years. When playing the piano, Schumann could use the index finger only partially and the middle finger not at all. He had lost sensation in those fingers, and was also unable to grip the hand properly. Furthermore, he had become steadily more shortsighted since boyhood, and could not recognize objects unless they were held close to his eyes. Finally, he had suffered from giddiness since Easter 1841.

To this Schumann himself added that military service would impede his career as a pianist (sic!); that in the event of a second rejection he would wish to appeal to the high command of Saxony; and that in any event he would be leaving Leipzig after the end of 1842.

Two army doctors examined him at different times. The first (whose opinion was not accepted by the authorities) felt that the finger paralysis justified exemption from rifle-drill. The second was much less impressed— "the paralysis is only partial, and, as is generally known, does not stop him playing the piano, and cannot therefore incapacitate him from handling a rifle". Both however agreed about the extreme myopia. The doctor to whom the 1841 vertigo had been reported took a grave view of that too. He found that Schumann was, "as his everyday appearance demonstrates", subject to serious rushes of blood to the head, and would if conscripted be a danger to himself as well as to others. So Schumann was finally excused drill and placed in the reserve; and he remained in Leipzig for another three years.

Not many eminent musicians with republican convictions would regard themselves as on oath in seeking exemption from a local counter-revolutionary militia notable chiefly for rifle-drills. But there is no real reason to doubt the general veracity of Schumann's case, the details of which conform with the new theory and the known facts. First, two hypotheses are confirmed; the index finger was weak, and it was treated by a device which was then blamed for the intractable paralysis which ensued, c1831. Some of the new information (paralysis of the middle finger as well as the index, loss of sensation in both, loss of grip in the hand) is consistent with a diagnosis of mercury poisoning; the rest (vertigo and severe myopia at 30) is consistent with a diagnosis of syphilis. There is some earlier evidence of both these secondary conditions. At 20, Schumann had written that something a doctor had told him had made him fear that he might one day go blind. There are also suggestions of giddy attacks in 1833 and 1838. Evidently his applications for exemption were no mere evasion, his grounds no mere hypochondria. Interested readers will find a detailed study of the cause and course of Schumann's illness, by Dr Eliot Slater, in a book² to be published later this year.

¹ *Neue Dokumente zur Schumann-Forschung im Stadtarchiv Leipzig*

² *Robert Schumann: the man and his music, a symposium*, ed. Walker