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Schumann's Year of Song A 125th Anniversary Contribution

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And Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him
(1 Kings 19 : 19)

For ten years Schumann wrote nothing but piano music. Then for twelve months he wrote nothing but songs. This has always seemed to the lay mind quite fantastic. But critics generally take it very much for granted. "The great song-year" they call it, as if this were somehow the natural development of every composer of piano works—as if Chopin, for example, might easily have had a great song-year, and missed one only by accident. Schumann's better fortune has been ascribed to his "great love and understanding of poetry". But this view is not very prevalent among those who actually know the poetry, and in any event is not outstandingly compelling as an explanation of the previous ten years' silence. Most charming and popular of all is the "wedding-year" theory that he was inspired by his bride-to-be, thus: "With the final blooming of his love for Clara Wieck he felt the need of a still more personal and intimate form of expression". Well, no doubt he did; but the connection with songwriting still seems far from self-evident on any ordinary aesthetic hypothesis.

To make matters more perplexing still, the evidence is not only that he had no obvious reason to begin song-writing, but that he had an obvious reason not to. He thought it an inferior art-form. In the earlier years of his editorship of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* he had gone so far as to refuse to review songs himself, and it remained his normal practice to delegate this task to one of his collaborators. As late as June 1839 we find him writing that he has all his life "rated vocal writing *below* instrumental music and never thought of it as a great art".

He might well have held this view on the ground that poetry as an expressive art was inferior to music. Any musician at any time tends to assume this, let alone a composer of genius in the Germany of the 1830s. On that assumption the verbal component of song could not fail to distract from, indeed detract from, the music. This too would not be wholly in conflict with Schumann's experience, or with his later practice. All his life he was to regard music as a separable and dominant element in song; his own treatment of poetry with its endless alterations, omissions, rearrangements and repetitions, speaks for itself.

Whatever the precise nature of the theoretical objection, however, it is at least plain that one did exist. We know too that Schumann would take it seriously; nor was he the man lightly to set aside his convictions. Yet the fact is that in the twelve months beginning 1 February 1840 he wrote over 160 vocal works, including at least 135 of the 246 solo songs in the complete Peters Edition. This is surely a world record total of vocal composition in a twelvemonth; and its achievement by a composer who deprecated vocal music seems to call for some explanation. The ultimate source of this inspiration is likely to remain a mystery. But it seems reasonable to look among the first songs for a proximate cause.

The best published source of information about the dating of the 1840 songs is to be found in V. E. Wolff's monograph *Robert Schumanns Lieder in ersten und späteren Fassungen* (Leipzig, 1914). This enumerates the contents of Schumann's own manuscript song-book into which he entered dated fair copies, and compares these texts with the published versions. The first of these songs in date-order is the *Schlusslied des Narren* (Feste's final song in *Twelfth Night*, "When that I was and a little tiny boy", published in 1854 as Op 127 No 5). The date is 1 Feb 1840.

There is no reason at all to doubt that it was in fact composed on or about that day. There is much reason to believe that Schumann's song-writing did in fact start early in that month. We hear little or nothing of songs in Schumann's other writing before that time. Thereafter we hear of little or nothing else. His letters, like Hugo Wolf's in 1888, are increasingly full of wonder at being so prolific, and delight at being so successful. Even the mottoes and quotations used as epigraphs in each issue of the *Neue Zeitschrift* suddenly sprouted a crop of references to songs and singing.

It seems reasonable to postulate an actual event just before February 1840 that changed Schumann's mind about song-writing at least to the extent of overcoming his known diffidence. What kind of event? It could hardly be a textual source; Schumann was by temperament unlikely to be persuaded by anything so impersonal as a written argument. We can assume a direct personal intervention. But it would not have come from Clara Wieck, nor from his collaborators on the journal. It is abundantly clear that it was he who expected to form their views rather than the converse; and in any case Clara was away in Berlin for the whole of January. Who then was there in Leipzig whom Schumann admired and respected,

someone with experience in song and other vocal writing, someone who had successfully set great texts to music?

It comes as no surprise to note that while the song-book records Saturday 1 Feb 1840 as the date of Schumann's first song, the diary records Friday 31 Jan 1840 as the day of a meeting with Mendelssohn. They were seeing quite a lot of each other at this time; and there was, as it happens, a special reason why the question of songs might well have been broached. Mendelssohn was just publishing his six songs op 47; and it would have been natural enough, in talking to the editor of one of the most influential music journals in Germany, who was also something of a friend and very much of an admirer, for the possibility of a review to be mooted. However, as we have seen, this would have presented something of a difficulty for Schumann; and it would have been in accordance with his honest, confiding and gauche nature of those years for him to have offered an explanation of why he did not personally review songs in the ordinary course, together with his earnest opinions on the subject of word-setting and the relation of words to music in general.

Mendelssohn was a discreet and charming man. He was also the composer of an oratorio in the actual word-setting of which Schumann had found much to admire; nor had any musician ever been more inspired by Shakespeare. On all counts then he was well placed to hear and answer.

The simplest rejoinder to the charge that words spoil music was (and is)-even if this were generally valid, there would still be the evident exceptional case of the work of truly great poets. "What about Shakespeare?" Mendelssohn might have asked, or "What about Goethe?". Interestingly enough, the ideas seem to have presented themselves just as names to Schumann, and in that order. Within 48 hours of that meeting with Mendelssohn he was setting some of the minor Goethe lyrics from the *Westöstlicher Divan*. But within 24 he was leafing through a volume of Shakespeare (demonstrably the newly-revised version of the Schlegel translations just published in Berlin) in the full intention of finding a text for a song.

We know too that for another fortnight his head was to be full of Shakespeare; there are the quotations in letters to Clara, a project of writing a thesis on music in Shakespeare, and so on. But at that particular moment we would expect his mind to be brimful of Mendelssohn. And so, as a matter of musical fact, it was:



a) Mendelssohn: *Overture, A Midsummer Night's Dream* op. 21 (1826).
Bars 203-8 (violins, clarinets, violas), transposed a fifth lower for comparison
b) Schumann: *Feste's Final Song from Twelfth Night* op.127 n.5 (1840) Piano prelude, original key.

It is like reading the minutes of a meeting with Mendelssohn about Shakespeare. At the moment when the two ideas react in and with Schumann's creative imagination, nascent music evolves. The falling theme (A) which appears throughout the song in both voice and piano is plainly a meaningful motif expressing the mettlesome coltishness of Feste. Mendelssohn-Shakespeare-the *Midsummer Night's Dream* music-the theme of Bottom the clown-a theme for the clown in *Twelfth Night* - the subconscious links could not be clearer. Whatever may have passed between the two composers that day there seems little doubt of at least one of the impulses that turned Schumann to song-writing and gave him and the world good cause to be grateful.

In practice his gratitude was far from overwhelming. The review of Mendelssohn's songs that appeared in the *Neue Zeitschrift* the following April was neither very flattering nor by Schumann. Perhaps he remained unconvinced; for as it happened Shakespeare and Goethe were not in fact the right elements for the characteristic compound of Schumann song. But they were surely the right catalysts. Within six months he had written, among many others, *Myrthen* op 25, the *Liederkreis* op 39, *Dichterliebe* op 48 and *Frauenliebe und -leben* op 42, which contain most of the best songs he was ever to write, - and many of the best songs ever written. Of course there may have been many other influences at work in all this which cannot now be identified. It is conceivable too that the whole thing may have been no more than coincidence. But what seems to have happened is that one winter day in Leipzig in 1840 it came about, quite by chance and unawares, that the greatest living master of the Lied appointed his successor.