

The love of a poet: Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe*

Midway between the upheavals and riots of 1830 and 1848 across so many places around Europe, it seemed as if the year 1840 allowed for a sense of resignation, or contentment, even happiness. For the young composer Robert Schumann, the year 1840 arguably represents the most blissful year of his life, a life stricken by much misfortune as well as mental illness. After a long courtship, and against the abject wishes of her father, Robert married Clara Wieck, one of the most prodigious young pianists of the era. He himself had abandoned the idea of a piano career after various injudicious experiments and obsessive repetitive practice left him with a right hand impairment. But at the age of 30, with no less than 24 brilliant opus numbers under his belt, he had become a fully fledged respected composer, as well as a notable writer and music critic. On his shoulders weighed not only the musical legacy of Beethoven and Schubert but also the great classic-romantic literary output in Germany, philosophical as much as poetic and polemic. Indeed, the many sides of poetic irony that he admired in the work of Jean Paul or Heinrich Heine first found their way in his piano pieces, and as of 1840 also in his songs.

After focusing solely on the piano for an entire decade he embarked on bringing word and music together, 130 songs in this single *annus mirabilis* alone. Some are deliberate cycles in the fashion of Schubert's *Winterreise*, others are bundled in mere collections of songs. Amidst the former, *Dichterliebe* stands out as a particularly timeless and felicitous achievement, taut and complete across the initial twenty poems he selected from Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo*.

The last word has not been written about what led Schumann to drop four songs and make various alterations before the work went to print four years later. Schumann was acutely aware of the various layers of irony that suffuse Heine's verse, and he subtly exploited them in this work. In the first version, simply entitled *20 Lieder und Gesänge*, the dark ambiguous tones are even more palpable. Removing four songs and adopting the title '*Dichterliebe*', a 'Poet's Love', brought the focus closer towards 'Liebe', i.e. love of the poet/protagonist without digging too far into the bitterness that is concealed underneath Heine's verse. People will forever argue whether the process made the work more Schumann than Heine or whether, by aiming to bring it closer to Heine, he brought it closer to Clara herself, his beloved. "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai", in that wondrous month of May 1840, he composed the first version of the work - 24 May to June 1 to be precise. Heine had framed the collection as the poet's nightly encounters with his fairy bride, and Schumann leave us in no doubt about his own living bride, using a four bar quote from Clara's Piano Concerto at the start of the first song. When at the end, Heine's poet decides to ditch all the bad songs and troubled dreams into a coffin to be sunk out at sea, our composer spins the most loving, sensuously ambiguous musical after-play, perhaps trying to forget all the difficulties and legal wrangling he and Clara went through in order to be allowed to marry.

The songs excel in the disarming simplicity of ideas, matching Heine's short simple stanzas with often boldly telling musical statements and equally reticent ones when needed. By interlocking the vocal and piano parts as often as separating or even opposing them, new poetic ideas continue to burst open not unlike the little flowers that seem to maintain an ever buzzy commentary in Heine's verse.

The other oft-forgotten fact about *Dichterliebe* is that the cycle was dedicated to the soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devriendt and was first performed by her. Over time, male singers naturally identified with Heine's male protagonist and *Dichterliebe* now owes its reputation to a long list of famous male singers and their mostly male accompanists. Over the course of his

career, the legendary German baritone Dietrich Fisher-Diskau recorded the cycle no less than four times, each time with a different pianist.

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