

Programme Note

Études Symphoniques | Opus 13

The *Études Symphoniques* owe their existence to Baron von Fricken, a keen music lover, amateur flautist and aspiring composer. In the summer of 1834 he sent Schumann his own set of flute variations for approval, and shortly received a remarkably insightful criticism of his efforts from the great composer. But in addition to assessing the work, Schumann was so impressed by von Fricken's theme that he began to write his own set of variations on it for the piano, resulting, after many revisions and alterations, in the *Études* as we now have them (1837). Schumann's original manuscripts for the work indicate the extent to which he changed his mind during those three years: initially the theme was entitled *Tema quasi Marcia Funebre*, and of the ten variations that followed, only two survived in the completed version. But five others are also now familiar thanks to Brahms's decisions to salvage them as a separate group in the *Breitkopf* complete edition. Schumann may well have decided to excise these variations because their generally brooding and introspective character

may have seemed to him to strain the richness and variability of the overall design, especially given the lugubrious and reflective nature of von Fricken's theme. Hence the present recording does not include the Opus Posthumous variations, in acknowledgement of Schumann's struggle to achieve the right transition from a funeral march in the opening theme to a radiant and triumphant finale: anything excised from a grand design so carefully and deliberately worked out should be left out of performance, even if, as is the case with the five variations Brahms saved, the discarded work is comprised of individual gems which perhaps ought to be performed independently.

It seems likely that the transformation achieved in the finale was inspired by Schumann's relationship, from 1836, with the young English pianist William Sterndale Bennett (1816-1875) — whose friendship embodied for Schumann the anglophile sentiments in Heinrich August Marschner's [1795-1861] *Ivanhoe* opera, *Die Tempel und die Jüdin* [expressed by the recurring phrase "Du stolzes England,

freue dich"]. For all its scintillating exuberance, the finale has nonetheless incurred criticism for its tendency towards repetition and the dotted rhythms throughout its episodes. But this relentlessness only serves to emphasise the stroke of genius which comes in the form of the dazzling *fff* B-flat major chord which occurs twenty bars before the end, piercing the D-flat major tonality like a blaze of light.

Kinderszenen | Opus 15 & *Kreisleriana* | Opus 16

During the unhappy months in which Friedrich Wieck's disapproval of Schumann's relationship with his daughter kept the composer and Clara apart, music was their chief means of communication. As Schumann wrote to her at Easter 1838, "It's very curious, but if I write much to you, I can't compose. The music goes all to you." His Op. 15 and Op. 16 were both cycles of pieces inspired by her — in fact an actual theme of hers may have been used in the latter — although very different in their style and inspiration. The former, *Kinderszenen*, is a charming collection of genre pieces suggested by Clara's remark that Schumann sometimes seemed to her like a child; the latter, *Kreisleriana*, is a much more elaborate artistic self-portrait that takes its title and programmatic

nature from one of the eponymous heroes of E. T. A. Hoffmann's [1776-1822] *The Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr, Together with a Fragmentary Biography, on Some Random Sheets of Scrap Paper, of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler*.

The *Kinderszenen* are so well known that the skill with which they are composed and linked into a series is often overlooked. Schumann declared that the title came to him *after* the composition, indicating that the musical ideas and contrasts between the movements were more important in his mind than the programmatic content. No. 1, "About foreign lands and peoples", conjures up an imaginative landscape — effectively the storyteller's "Once upon a time..." — which is embellished throughout the subsequent movements until the conclusion, "The poet speaks", when at last the storyteller himself, Schumann, steps forward. Some, such as No. 5, "Happiness", briefly explore a single phrase and figuration; others, such as No. 11, "Frightening", deal in succinct contrasts of mood and tempo. No. 3, "Blindman's buff", and No. 9, "Knight of the hobby-horse", are playful without ever becoming archly roguish; some are reflective without ever descending into sugary sentimentality — here the most famous example is the evergreen No. 7, "Dreaming".