

## INTRODUCTION

### *Situating Schumann's Piano Concerto*

#### **'A Worthy Monument to the Sanity of Art': Patterns of Reception**

One day during a school music lesson, my teacher turned to me and stated, somewhat provocatively, that 'everything Schumann wrote after 1840 was poor, except for the Piano Concerto'. As I have since discovered, he was not expressing an original opinion. The idea that Schumann achieved much in the piano music of the 1830s and the songs of 1840 but faded into mediocrity as soon as he tried to compose large-scale orchestral works has been a regular theme of Schumann reception for more than one hundred years, and is at least as old as Felix Weingartner's pronouncement, dating from 1897, that Schumann's symphonies were 'in no wise among his most important works'. Whereas 'In [Schumann's] pianoforte pieces the invention of little, but very expressive, themes . . . is very characteristic', for Weingartner 'in his great symphonies he does not succeed with these themes and themelets, however warm and beautiful the feeling may have been from which they sprang.'<sup>1</sup>

The view that the Piano Concerto, Op. 54 is an exception to this rule is also often expressed. Composed between 1841 and 1845, it has secured perennial membership of the performing canon, remaining a favourite of pianists and audiences alike; and its critical reception does not evidence suspicion or hostility to anything like the extent encountered by Schumann's other large-scale works of the 1840s and 1850s. Whereas the symphonies have endured despite their critical reception, and the oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri*, the opera *Genoveva* and the monumental *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* have drifted to the margins of musical history, Op. 54 belongs to a select group of piano concerti which

continues to define the genre's post-classical evolution in the public and scholarly imagination.

The Piano Concerto has remained comparatively immune to other tendencies in Schumann reception. The habit of hitching the meaning and value of Schumann's music to biographical factors has largely bypassed Op. 54. The piano works composed between 1835 and 1840 are invariably regarded as the products of unrequited love, fuelled by the prohibition placed, by her father Friedrich, on Schumann's relationship with Clara Wieck, which blossomed in 1835 but was only consummated in marriage in September 1840, following a bitter and protracted legal dispute.<sup>2</sup> Schumann himself acknowledged the link, explaining in a letter to Heinrich Dorn of 5 September 1839 that 'much in my music embodies, and indeed can only be understood against the background of the battles that Clara cost me'.<sup>3</sup> Yet although Op. 54's first movement, completed as a standalone *Phantasie* in 1841, owed its genesis to an engagement with the genre that stretched back more than a decade and intersected in multiple ways with Robert's developing relationship with Clara, commentators on Op. 54 have generally not sought interpretations akin to John Daverio's intensely biographical readings of the compositions from the Piano Sonata, Op. 11 to the *Nachtstücke*, Op. 23, which he describes collectively as 'musical love letters'.<sup>4</sup>

The works after 1840 – including the four symphonies, the major chamber music, *Das Paradies und die Peri*, *Genoveva* and the *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* – are more often perceived through a medical lens, reflecting Schumann's struggle against mental and physical illness, which arguably had its origins in the possible symptoms of primary syphilis he reported in 1831, and which culminated in his attempted suicide in Düsseldorf in February 1854 and subsequent committal to the sanatorium at Endenich, where he died in July 1856. Metaphors of incapacity abound in the literature, often highlighting an apparent inability to think in the large-scale, developmental ways necessary for the composition of symphonic forms, a general incompetence in the handling of orchestration, which, we are told, worsened as his illness advanced, and an inept feeling for musical drama, which accounts for *Genoveva*'s lasting obscurity. Carl Dahlhaus' views on the Symphony No. 1, Op. 38 are broadly representative:

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Schumann's main motive [in the first movement] . . . permeates virtually the entire movement . . . It is clear that both the lyric tone of Schumann's idea, which is more suitable to a character piece than to a symphony, and his lack of melodic variety work against the large-scale form he was seeking to create . . . However shrewdly Schumann calculated the form of this movement, by substituting the motivic unity of the character piece for that of the Beethoven symphony he became embroiled in contradictions between lyricism and monumentality . . . that led not so much to a productive dialectic as to a mutual paralysis of its various components.<sup>5</sup>

For Dahlhaus, as for others, Schumann was a miniaturist who could not translate the idiom of his piano and song cycles into symphonic forms. The resulting 'paralysis', which Dahlhaus describes in suggestively medical language, amounts to a kind of compositional infirmity that incapacitates musical form.<sup>6</sup>

The Symphony No. 2, Op. 61 has proved especially prone to this kind of diagnosis. Composed in 1845 in the midst of the health crisis that began during the Russian tour undertaken with Clara in 1844 and persisted into 1846, Op. 61 is often heard as symbolic of Schumann's battle with mental and physical illness, again responding to his scattered comments on the work. Mosco Carner's version of the argument is extreme, but not atypical. Carner, like Dahlhaus, considered Schumann 'a lyric miniaturist' whose 'self-chosen domain was first the short self-contained piano piece and song' and who was consequently 'unable to invent true symphonic themes'.<sup>7</sup> Schumann confronted the challenge of an overarching Beethovenian narrative directly in Op. 61 by seeking to give symphonic expression to 'a terrifying personal experience' in which 'the spectre of madness was before him'.<sup>8</sup> Carner goes beyond Dahlhaus by regarding Schumann's infirmity as explicitly gendered: Op. 61 fails because Schumann's depressive psychology evidences an inherent femininity, which ill equipped him to express personal struggle in symphonic form: 'Schumann was no heroic figure: emotionally a feminine type [!], he must have found the subject of which he wished to treat . . . fundamentally uncongenial and beyond his powers. That his mental state at the time was an important factor in contributing to the pathetic failure of this work, is not to be gainsaid.'<sup>9</sup>

Opp. 54 and 61 are contemporaneous works – the final date entered on Op. 54's autograph score is 29 July 1845; the Symphony was begun in December of that year – but critical opinion seldom saddles the Piano Concerto with comparable psychiatric baggage.<sup>10</sup> When Donald Francis Tovey described it as 'a worthy monument to the sanity of art' which 'illuminates the tragic pathos of Schumann's later years' but 'is itself untouched', he captured the persisting sense that the Concerto somehow stands apart from the medical tribulations afflicting other large-scale compositions of this period.<sup>11</sup> This feeling is echoed by Dahlhaus, who registered no problems of generic inconsistency or structural paralysis in Op. 54 akin to those he detected in the 'Spring' Symphony because for him there is no requirement to grasp the Concerto in symphonic terms. Instead, we should construe its first movement as 'a piano piece with orchestral accompaniment, which, despite its unusually large dimensions, is lyrical in tone and monothematic in its form'. Op. 54 is, by this argument, held together by the textural 'unity' that affiliation with the lyric character piece confers. A property that incapacitates the 'Spring' Symphony – the use of lyric material in a large-scale orchestral composition – is in this case viewed as formally advantageous. Consequently – and here Op. 54's exceptionalism is patently invoked – Dahlhaus regarded the work as 'a historically unique, unreduplicatable special instance of the "romantic concerto"'.<sup>12</sup>

Critical approval and popularity notwithstanding, the Piano Concerto has also suffered a degree of neglect in several areas of its reception, reflecting a somewhat scattered response to Schumann's concerti in general. Daverio's characterisation of Schumann's uniquely systematic attitude towards genre is, for example, oddly neglectful of the concerti. Viewing his career panoptically, Daverio was struck by Schumann's successive annexation of genres, going so far as to propose a generic 'system', the formation of which gained momentum in the 1840s, as the major classical categories were broached virtually on a yearly basis. As he explains:

There is no reason to believe that Schumann consciously determined, at a specific point in his career, to exhaust the possibilities of the various musical genres in turn. Yet when we stand back and view his output as a whole, its general outlines emerge with unmistakable clarity: the initial focus on piano music during the

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1830s gives way, during the next decade, to song, symphony, chamber music, oratorio, and dramatic music, and finally, in the composer’s last years, to a recapitulation of the entire scheme and the addition of church music.<sup>13</sup>

The concerto is conspicuously absent from this list; and yet few genres preoccupied Schumann more consistently across his career or provoked him to seek more radical compositional solutions. In this respect, the publication of Op. 54 by Breitkopf and Härtel in 1846 signalled the fulfilment of an ambition, which had intermittently preoccupied Schumann for nearly twenty years, and which subsequently lingered until the end of his creative life. In addition to Op. 54, he also produced concerti for cello (Op. 129 of 1850) and violin (completed in 1853 and published posthumously), as well as works that are manifestly concerti by any other name (the *Concertstück* for four horns and orchestra, Op. 86 of 1849) and single-movement compositions in dialogue with concerto principles (the Introduction and Allegro Appassionato, Op. 92 of 1849; the Introduction and Concert-Allegro, Op. 134 of 1853, both for piano and orchestra). Stalled attempts at concerto composition are a recurrent feature of his output before 1841; and as a critic, Schumann maintained a lively conversation with the piano concerti of his time, an encounter that stimulated him to commit his ideas to paper as both composer and journalist. Although his engagement with the concerto is perhaps less orderly than his progress in song, symphony, chamber music and oratorio between 1840 and 1845, it nevertheless forms a circumscribing thread in these years, which is not easily accommodated in Daverio’s ‘system’.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to Op. 54’s significance for Schumann’s career, the work is also pivotal to the piano concerto’s history. The debates with which Schumann engaged in the 1830s – ranging across questions of form, style, genre, virtuosity, organology, aesthetics and cultural politics – and the substantive alternatives he explored in Op. 54 capture critical issues in the genre’s post-classical development;<sup>15</sup> Op. 54 moreover served as a clear compositional model for many later-century examples. Yet our grasp of the work’s place in musical history remains somewhat uncertain.

*Pace* Dahlhaus, historians seeking to classify Schumann’s Piano Concerto have tended to regard it as a seminal contribution to the ‘symphonic’ concerto, a version of the genre that emerged in

the mid-nineteenth century in response to the superficiality and excess of early-century virtuoso concerti. The symphonic concerto is, however, a rather unstable category, which adequately accounts neither for Op. 54 nor for its relationship with other allegedly ‘symphonic’ works. Often, the compositions housed within it have little in common except for an apparent suspicion of early-century virtuosity. Schumann, to be sure, was highly critical of the virtuoso aesthetic, especially as practised by Parisian composers. But his engagement with virtuoso concerti is complex; and our modern understanding of this umbrella term is frequently inconsistent with Schumann’s grasp of the repertoire. As Juan Martin Koch rightly observes, in seeking to comprehend the genre’s mid-nineteenth-century evolution, ‘it would be a mistake to focus one-sidedly on those aesthetic principles which, from about 1840 onwards, gained increasing importance with the help of the dichotomy “virtuoso” versus “symphonic”’.<sup>16</sup> Concerti ordinarily classified, and just as often ridiculed, for their association with virtuosity are themselves something of an analytical and theoretical *terra incognita*, knowledge of which profoundly alters our understanding both of what Schumann was hoping to achieve and of what our theoretical tools for the analysis of piano concerti should consist, if we have any aspiration towards historical accuracy. Looking towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, few concerti left their mark so obviously on the repertoire, especially in the Russian and Scandinavian contexts. It is not hyperbolic to argue that Op. 54 functions as a kind of generic fulcrum which synthesises compositional problems accruing from the early nineteenth century and defines a subsequent field of practice stretching as far as the First World War. But this critical and compositional legacy has been left comparatively untouched; the obvious influence Op. 54 exerted on concerti by Grieg, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and many others remains to be explored in any detail.

Analytical commentaries on Op. 54 are also comparatively scarce and have focused predominantly on the first movement, thanks perhaps to its original conception as a single-movement *Phantasie* and close engagement with the problems that Schumann diagnosed in his critical writings of the 1830s. Commentators have called attention to the *Phantasie*’s nascent ‘two-dimensionality’ – its tactic

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of embedding aspects of a three-movement concerto cycle within a one-movement sonata form – as well as its high degree of material integration and tendency to favour thematic processes over overt displays of pianism or rhetorical excess.<sup>17</sup> Fascinating issues of syntax in this movement, and the questions it poses for modern formal theory, however, await thorough scrutiny; and the second and third movements, which Schumann added in 1845, have received notably scant attention, an oversight that is especially unfortunate in view of their complex relationship with the first movement and the Finale's formal, rhythmic and metrical riches.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Schumann's Concerto raises unaddressed socio-political questions. Concerti engender and reflect social relations in a unique way because a discourse between the individual and the collective is built into their generic identity. The strategic management of solo-orchestral interactions is central to this issue and has constituted both a major preoccupation of composers across the concerto's history and an important barometer of their changing social environment. When Schumann diagnosed what he regarded as the flaws in many of the concerti composed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, he pointed to problems that were social and political as much as aesthetic, having to do with the mediation of individual autonomy and collective responsibility in a post-Enlightenment society. As we will see, political idealism and questions of national identity often lurked close to the surface in these debates. To analyse the ways in which Op. 54 reconceives the genre's forms and material processes is therefore necessarily to tackle the question of its social responsibilities and political aspirations. The interaction of 'symphonic' features with residues of the virtuoso style and the lyric elements identified by Dahlhaus feeds directly into the Concerto's dialogue with cultural politics, helping to shape a vision of the genre as an allegory of the aesthetic state.

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It is this book's principal aim to address these various issues by offering a complete analytical conspectus of Schumann's Piano Concerto, framed by an account of its genesis and of its critical and compositional reception. Any deep engagement with Op. 54 needs

additionally to deal with the complex questions of form and generic identity that attend the nineteenth-century piano concerto more generally. In the field of music theory especially, conceptions of concerto form have been heavily dependent on canonical repertoire, and above all on ideas centred on the reception of Mozart. Schumann, however, was vitally engaged with a body of early-nineteenth-century works which has little presence in the performing canon or the literature on concerto form, but which is an essential component of Op. 54's pre-history. Before engaging in detail with the work itself, I consequently appraise important trends in the theory of concerto form in Chapter 1 and bring them into dialogue with the genre's post-classical history, as the compositional milieu in which Schumann's ideas about piano concerti germinated, before sketching Op. 54's genesis and the evolution of his approach to the genre in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 then develop an analytical reading of the Concerto, drawing on the framework established in Chapters 1 and 2. For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with the jargon of modern formal theory, I supplement the analyses in these chapters with Appendix I, which lists and defines my terminology. Chapter 5 appraises aspects of the work's performance history and critical reception and also examines concerti of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which betray traces of Op. 54's formal, stylistic, material and aesthetic fingerprints. Chapter 5's conspectus of performance history is supported by Appendix II, which compiles a representative discography.

My school music teacher was, I think, quite wrong about Schumann's mature instrumental works; to this extent, he was also wrong about Op. 54, which takes its place in the procession of achievements in the 'higher' forms spanning from the Symphony No. 1 of 1841 to the Symphony No. 3 of 1850 and the *Szenen aus Goethes Faust*, begun in 1844 but not completed until 1853. Reappraising the rich array of theoretical, analytical, historical and cultural-political issues that intersect in Op. 54 consequently affords fresh grounds for rethinking Schumann's contributions across the major classical genres.



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1. Felix Weingartner, *Die Symphonie nach Beethoven* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1897) and *The Symphony Since Beethoven*, translated by M. B. Dutton (Boston, MA: Oliver Ditson, 1904), excerpted as 'Schumann as Symphonist (1904–1906)', in R. Larry Todd, ed., *Schumann and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 375–84, at 377 and 378. Weingartner was also highly critical of Schumann's orchestration, adumbrating a view that is repeated in English-language literature across the twentieth century. Compare Weingartner's views with those of Adolph Schubring, published in 1861, who holds that Schumann 'is at his greatest in his epic works', which for Schubring includes the dramatic works (*Das Paradies und die Peri*, *Manfred*, *Genoveva* and *Faust*), the symphonies ('orchestral novels') and string quartets, and the early piano cycles, without differentiation. See 'Schumanniana No. 4: The Present Musical Epoch and Robert Schumann's Position in Music History (1861)', translated by John Michael Cooper in Todd, ed., *Schumann and His World*, 362–74, at 371.
2. For an account of Robert and Clara's legal dispute with Friedrich Wieck, see John Daverio, *Robert Schumann: Herald of a New Poetic Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 182–96.
3. Quoted in Daverio, *Robert Schumann*, 131.
4. *Ibid.*, 131–81 and especially 132, where Daverio notes that 'In Schumann's compositions art and life continually engage in a kind of chemical process of transformation. "Biographical" subjects, ranging from place names to human beings, are converted into "aesthetic" subjects, musical materials, and then back again into more tangible poetic designations.' One exception to Op. 54's exemption from readings of this kind can be found in Joseph Kerman, 'The Concertos', in Beate Perrey, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Schumann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 173–94, at 178, where Kerman briefly suggests that the head motive of the first movement's main theme – C–B–A – alludes to Clara.
5. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 159–60. It is worth noting that Dahlhaus' original German is subtly different to Robinson's translation, which renders 'der Mangel an melodischer Variabilität' as 'his lack of material variability' rather than 'its [i.e. the material's] lack of variability', implying a fault in Schumann's technique which Dahlhaus attributes to the material itself. I am grateful to Steven Vande Moortele for pointing this out.
6. Dahlhaus' phrase here is 'sich gegenseitig lähmten': literally, lyricism and monumentality 'paralyse each other'.

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7. Mosco Carner, 'The Orchestral Music', in Gerald Abraham, ed., *Schumann: A Symposium* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 176–244, at 177.
8. *Ibid.*, 180–1.
9. *Ibid.*, 220–1.
10. On the Symphony's genesis, see Daverio, *Robert Schumann*, 315–16.
11. Tovey, 'CXXI: Schumann, Pianoforte Concerto in A Minor, Op. 54', *Essays in Musical Analysis*, vol. III *Vol. 3, Concertos* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 182–4, at 182.
12. Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 141.
13. Daverio, *Robert Schumann*, 218–19.
14. A conspectus of Schumann's concerti is offered in Kerman, 'The Concertos', in Perrey, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Schumann*.
15. This context has been most substantially and systematically explored by Claudia Macdonald; see *Robert Schumann and the Piano Concerto* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
16. Juan Martin Koch, *Das Klavierkonzert des 19. Jahrhunderts und der Kategorie des Symphonischen* (Sinsing: Studio, 2001), 42: 'Zudem wäre es verfehlt, den Blick einseitig auf diejenigen ästhetischen Prinzipien zu lenken, die seit etwa 1840 unter Zuhilfenahme der sich nun zum Topos verfestigenden Dichotomie "virtuos" versus "symphonisch" immer stärker an Bedeutung gewannen.' Koch defines Schumann's Op. 54 as 'symphonic' because he sees its genesis as part of Schumann's 'road to the symphony' rather than as a work contributing to a separate generic category of 'symphonic' concerti. He writes: 'The effectiveness of the symphonic category can be observed in relation to Robert Schumann's A minor Piano Concerto insofar as this work is often attributed a special significance on his "road to the symphony".' ('Die Wirksamkeit der Kategorie des Symphonischen ist in bezug auf Robert Schumanns a-Moll-Klavierkonzert insofern zu beobachten, als diesem Werk häufig eine besondere Bedeutung auf dessen "Weg zur Symphonie" zugesprochen wird.')
17. The term 'two-dimensionality' is coined by Steven Vande Moortele; see *Two-Dimensional Sonata Form: Form and Cycle in Single-Movement Instrumental Works by Liszt, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Zemlinsky* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009).
18. Koch, for example, allocates ten pages to his analysis of the first movement of Op. 54 and little more than two to the Intermezzo and rondo; see *Das Klavierkonzert des 19. Jahrhunderts und der Kategorie des Symphonischen*, 219–28 and 228–30, respectively. Similarly, Macdonald devotes an entire chapter to the *Phantasie* but little more than eight pages of a much larger chapter to the Intermezzo and Finale; see *Robert Schumann and the Piano Concerto*, 223–46 and 263–71.