

Schumann – 4 Symphonies (Karajan) [1972]

Written by bluesever

Tuesday, 12 January 2010 00:20 - Last Updated Thursday, 01 May 2014 22:12

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Disc: 1 1. *Symphony No. 1 in B flat major ('Spring'), Op. 38: 1. Andante un poco maestoso - Allegro molto vivace* 2. *Symphony No. 1 in B flat major ('Spring'), Op. 38: 2. Larghetto - (attacca:)* 3. *Symphony No. 1 in B flat major ('Spring'), Op. 38: 3. Scherzo. Molto vivace - Trio 1/2* 4. *Symphony No. 1 in B flat major ('Spring'), Op. 38: 4. Allegro animato e grazioso* 5. *Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61: 1. Sostenuto assai - Allegro, ma non troppo* 6. *Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61: 2. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio 1/2* 7. *Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61: 3. Adagio espressivo* 8. *Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61: 4. Allegro molto vivace*
Disc: 2

1. *Symphony No. 3 in E flat major ('Rhenish'), Op. 97: 1. Lebhaft* 2. *Symphony No. 3 in E flat major ('Rhenish'), Op. 97: 2. Scherzo. Sehr mäßig* 3. *Symphony No. 3 in E flat major ('Rhenish'), Op. 97: 3. Nicht schnell* 4. *Symphony No. 3 in E flat major ('Rhenish'), Op. 97: 4. Feierlich* 5. *Symphony No. 3 in E flat major ('Rhenish'), Op. 97: 5. Lebhaft* 6. *Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Op. 120: 1. Ziemlich langsam - Lebhaft - (attacca:)* 7. *Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Op. 120: 2. Romanze. Ziemlich langsam - (attacca:)* 8. *Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Op. 120: 3. Scherzo. Lebhaft - Trio - (attacca:)* 9. *Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Op. 120: 4. Langsam – Lebhaft*

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra Herbert von Karajan – conductor

Robert Schumann's four symphonies have a tenuously permanent and permanently tenuous place in the repertoire. Mention of them is often qualified with well-rehearsed criticisms that they are badly orchestrated, too episodic; they substitute repetition and juxtaposition for "proper" symphonic development. And yet they return again and again, working their strange, compelling magic. But Schumann has always been a tricky sell; his emotional immediacy can seem too close for comfort. For, at the very outset of the modern era, Schumann (1810-56) made music out of a task that still nags at the modern soul: the construction of identity.

The appeal and disquiet can be sensed when comparing Schumann's symphonies to the work of the prolific British sociologist Anthony Giddens. Before he became better known as the

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intellectual progenitor of Tony Blair's "Third Way," Giddens wrote a book called "Modernity and Self-Identity," analyzing how individuals build their personalities even as the available roles and categories constantly change. Giddens distilled the tensions of late modern existence down to four particular dilemmas and, in the process, categorized just why Schumann's symphonies still hold our attention and disturb our equanimity.

"Powerlessness versus appropriation" — that's Schumann's Third Symphony. Modernity creates the sense of a lack of control; we attempt to turn the tables by appropriating elements of modern life into our own identities. Schumann's Third, the "Rhenish," is a masterpiece of appropriation, a string of fugitive images roped into a whole by sheer brio. Schumann further asserts his prerogative by adding a famous programmatic impression of the ceremony to elevate the archbishop of Cologne; the archaic procession fits in the symphony simply because Schumann puts it there. Faced with a kaleidoscope of experience, Schumann asserts his control over it simply by insisting that it all belongs together.

"Authority versus uncertainty" — that's Schumann's Second. The Romantic era revered and canonized the past as fixed points in a newly, uncomfortably fluid existence. The aura of Bach permeates the Second Symphony, from its organ-like prelude to its sinuous slow-movement theme, borrowed from Bach's "Musical Offering." In the finale, the opening theme is gradually superseded by a tapestry of themes from the symphony's other movements, musical references to Bach, to Beethoven, and finally to Schumann himself. By appealing to the authority of past masters, Schumann pieces together his own musical personality.

"Unification versus fragmentation" — that might characterize Schumann's entire style. One of the most characteristic Romantic forms was the aphoristic, evocative fragment. Schumann's works similarly replaced the standard musical ideal of sustained argument with mobiles of often contradictory keys and moods.

The late musicologist John Daverio elegantly summed up Schumann's connoisseurship of forms in which "the gradual and logical evolution of ideas recedes in favor of an associative web." The Second's finale spins such a web; so does the Fourth Symphony, a gathering of themes that Schumann rewrote to be both more tightly and more implicitly cyclical. In the first version, for example, the opening movement's contrasting themes linked up in counterpoint, a duet Schumann later eliminated. The connection is deliberately put just out of earshot. But it is Giddens's final dilemma, "personalized versus commodified experience," that most fully evokes both the unease and the persistence of Schumann's music. We sense the contrived nature of commodified experience, the homogenized sense of reality presented through mass media and marketing, but are also, unconsciously, accustomed to it. We hold personalized experience as

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an ideal, but actually encountering it upsets the modus vivendi we've made with commodified experience.

Schumann's symphonies are intensely personal. The First was composed in a matter of days, a live wire powered by Schumann's elation at his long-awaited marriage — vigorous rhythms repeatedly falling into unexpected lyrical embraces. The Second, written in the wake of a serious illness, reworks the Beethovenian paradigm of struggle and victory into a mosaic self-portrait.

With Beethoven's symphonies, we filter the raw emotion through the historical construct of a symbolic Beethoven; Schumann eliminates that interpretive middleman. In a way, where we acknowledge Beethoven, we eavesdrop on Schumann, even at his most grand. And we are burdened with the knowledge that Schumann died in an asylum, afflicted with a madness syphilitic, or schizophrenic, or perhaps both. Speculation that attributes the idiosyncrasies of Schumann's later music to his imminent mental breakdown is essentially defensive: a firewall against feeling too keenly the hope at the core of his symphonies.

Knowing that the uncanny grace with which Schumann assembled his symphonic identity ultimately failed him in life only highlights the fragility of our own jerry-built identities. But it's that hope and grace that continually pulls listeners and performers back to Schumann. Schumann felt what we feel, the anxiety and alienation of finding oneself in the confusion of the modern, the way we assemble personalities out of bits and pieces of experience, and transformed the process into joy (the First Symphony), coherence (the Fourth), wonder (the Third), and triumph (the Second). Schumann knows us sometimes a little too well. --- Matthew Guerrieri, boston.com

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