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Robert Schumann's Piano Cycle Scenes from Childhood and Different Ways of Its Interpretation

Abstract: The theme of childhood is one of the typical features of romantic era. Looking at the work of great composers of the nineteenth century, it's undoubtedly Robert Schumann who was influenced by it the most. This essay discusses particularly the structure of *Kinderszenen op. 15*, the context of its origins, inspirational sources and its contemporary perception. The part devoted to the interpretation possibilities aims to shed light on the interpretation possibilities while comparing three recordings of the renowned pianists, namely Vladimir Horowitz, Ivan Moravec and Lang Lang.

Il tema dell'infanzia è uno di quelli caratteristici del periodo romantico. Guardando l'opera dei grandi compositori del XIX secolo, è senza dubbio Robert Schumann che è stato influenzato da questo tema più degli altri. Questo saggio discute in particolare la struttura di *Kinderszenen op. 15*, nelle sue origini, fonti di ispirazione e nella sua percezione nella contemporaneità. La parte dedicata alle possibili interpretazioni pianistiche mira a far luce sulle esse, mettendo a confronto tre esecuzioni di pianisti di fama, vale a dire Vladimir Horowitz, Ivan Moravec e Lang Lang.

Keywords: *Childhood, Music, Schumann, Kinderszenen, Interpretations*

Parole chiave: *Infanzia, musica, Schumann, Kinderszenen, interpretazioni*

1) Introduction

The theme of childhood is one of the typical features of romantic era. It embodies a symbolic return to the roots, nature, fantasies and dreams, for which there's no real place in the adult world. For Romanticism and its intention of portraying everything what's poetic and elusive, childhood was an ideal subject in every field of art, including music.

Looking at the work of great composers of the nineteenth century, it's undoubtedly Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856) who was influenced by it the most. His *Album für der Jugend op. 68*, *Ballscenes¹ op. 109* or *Drei Clavier-Sonaten für die Jugend op. 118* belong even today to the most imaginative and poetic works dedicated to children. Schumann wrote them mainly for his own kids and all of them were composed in the last period of his career. In this context, *Kinderszenen op. 15* holds a special place. Written in 1838, they are the first of Schumann's works linked to the childhood and what makes them different is also the fact that more than for kids they are, in Schumann's own words *Rückspiegelungen eines Älteren für Ältere*.²

This essay discusses particularly the structure of the cycle, the context of its origins, inspirational sources and its contemporary perception. The part devoted to the interpretation possibilities aims to shed light on the interpretation possibilities while comparing three recordings of the renowned pianists, namely Vladimir Horowitz, Ivan Moravec and Lang Lang.

The chosen recordings include Vladimir Horowitz's *Original Jacket Collection (CD 4)* containing the record of the cycle from 1950, Ivan Moravec's CD *Schumann/Franck* from 1989 and Lang Lang's *Memory* CD from 2006. In addition to the fact, that all of these recordings are considered to be representative, the intention was also to show the ways of interpretation of the cycle by the different pianistic generations.

¹ Originally title *Kinderball*.

² Eismann, G. (1956). *Robert Schumann: eine Biographie in Wort und Bild*. Leipzig, p. 157. Lesznai, L. (1974). *Robert Schumann – Kindeszenen op. 15*, T. 13, Fasc. 1/4, *Academia Kijadó*. p. 87-94.

2) Inspirational sources: Schumann's own childhood and his relationship with Clara Wieck

Robert Schumann was born on June 8, 1810 in Zwickau, Saxony, as the sixth and the last child of August Schumann and Johanna Christiana Schumann (née Schnabel).³ His father originally led a small grocery business, but thanks to his enormous interest in the literature and poetry, he later became a bookseller and publisher. Together with his brother Friedrich he established the publishing firm in 1808 in which he, besides the classical works of German literature, published also his own translations of Walter Scott and George Byron. Robert, who was his favourite child, was thanks to this able to discover the world of literature from a very young age which, as we know, influenced his whole life. Robert's mother, who right after the wedding shortly helped her husband in his grocery store, stayed home due to the care of her five children.⁴ When Robert was three, she got typhoid and to avoid the infection, she put him into the care of her friend Eleanore Ruppert,⁵ where he stayed for next two-and-a-half years. Although he was allowed to visit his own family only once a day, there is no evidence that this separation was traumatic to him. He called Mrs. Ruppert as the 'second mother' and by his own account he felt unhappy only by going back home at the end.⁶ Despite this fact, Schumann's childhood was very happy and he was educated «lovingly and carefully».⁷ Especially father, who highly supported his son's musical talent, was very dear to him and his unexpected death in 1826 must have been a big shock for the whole family. His estate, which at the time of his death totalled 60,000 thalers, enabled the family live a comfortable life and moreover, his will had provided Robert with an extra 200 thalers a year if he chose to go to the university.⁸

In 1828 Robert went to Leipzig and became a law student. Unlike the Zwickau, Leipzig was a big city with an extensive musical life and lot of new opportunities for a young man, who started to consider the idea of becoming a pianist. In the same year he met a famous piano teacher Friedrich Wieck (1785 – 1873) and by August became his pupil.⁹ At Wieck's home, he met among the others also his teacher's daughter Clara (1819 – 1896), who was then tremendously gifted child prodigy. During the following years they became friends, which have changed by the summer of 1835 when Schumann felt in love with her. Clara was just 16 and she was already one of the finest pianist in Europe. Her career meant everything to her father, whose furious disapproval followed right after he found out what had happened. He told Schumann that he was no longer permitted to see Clara and sent her to Dresden.

That was just beginning of long-time battle for Clara between Schumann and Wieck, who until 1840 constantly tried to separate them. Not seeing each other, the pair began the intense correspondence that would include 275 letters by the end of 1839.¹⁰ The conflict between them and Wieck, who wanted Clara to «live solely...for music»¹¹ climaxed on July

³ Sadie S. & Tyrrell J. (eds) (2001). *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 760.

⁴ Eduard (b. 1797), Carl (b. 1801), Julius (b. 1805), Emilia (b. 1807), Laura (stillborn 1809) and Robert (b. 1810).

⁵ Ostwald, P. (1985). *Schumann: The Inner Voice of a Musical Genius*, Boston: Northeastern, p. 15.

⁶ Worthen, J. (2007). *Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician*, Yale London: Yale University Press, p. 7.

⁷ Wasielewski, W. J. (1975) (trans. A. L. Alger), *Life of Robert Schumann*, Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, p. 126.

⁸ Ibid, p. 13.

⁹ Ibid, p. 22

¹⁰ Sadie S. & Tyrrell J., p. 768.

¹¹ Worthen, p. 139.

1840 when the Leipzig court gave official permission to Schumann and Clara to marry.¹² They did so on Saturday, 12 September in Schönewald, one day before Clara's 21 birthday.

3) Origins of the composition and its contemporary perception

In early 1838 Schumann composed three piano cycles in a short time: *Novelletten op. 21*, *Kinderszenen op. 15* and *Kreisleriana op. 16*. The first two are closely connected; *Kinderszenen* were originally titled as *Kindergeschichten* which as well as the title of *Novelletten* (from German word *Novell* – novel) contains literary element.¹³

Kinderszenen consists of thirteen easy compositions with poetic titles: *Vom fremden Ländern und Menschen*, *Curiose Geschichte*, *Hasche-Mann*, *Bittendes Kind*, *Glückes genug*, *Wichtige Begebenheit*, *Träumerei*, *Am Camin*, *Ritter vom Steckenpferd*, *Fast zu Ernst*, *Fürchtenmachen*, *Kind im Einschlummers* and *Der Dichter spricht*. The titles Schumann added afterwards with the intention to illustrate their character. As he wrote to his friend Heinrich Dörne: «[...] they are, as a matter of fact, merely gentle hints to their conception and interpretation.»¹⁴

Like many of Schumann's works from this period, *Kinderszenen* were inspired by Clara. In the letter from March 1838 he wrote to her:

I've discovered, that nothing spurs the imagination more than anticipation and longing for something or other; that was the case in these last days when I was just waiting for your letter and filled books with compositions-strange things, mad things, even friendly things-you will really be surprised when you play them-I often feel that I'm going to burst because of all the music in me-and before I forget what I composed-it was like a musical response to what you once wrote me, that I sometimes seemed like a child to you in short, it was just as if I were wearing a dress with flared sleeves, and I wrote about 30¹⁵ droll little pieces, from which I selected twelve¹⁶, and I've called them *Kinderszenen*. You will enjoy them, but, of course, you will have to forget that you are a virtuoso...you'll find everything, and at the same time they are as light as air.¹⁷

The nature of the pieces he described to her as «light and gentle and happy like our future»¹⁸ and he also mentioned them in the letter from March 15, 1838: «[...] the *Kinderszenen* will probably be finished when you arrive; I like them very much; I impress people a lot when I play them, especially myself.»¹⁹ *Kinderszenen* were also Clara's favourite. In the letter of 21 March 1839 she told him: «They belong only to the two of us, don't they? And they are always on my mind; they are so simple, warm, so quite like you; I can't wait till tomorrow when I can play them again.»²⁰ Also Schumann's good friend Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886) adored this piano cycle and he often played it to his own daughter Blandine. «Well, my dear Schumann, two or three times a week [...] I play your *Kinderszenen* to her in the evening; this enchants her, and me still more, as you can imagine [...]».²¹

¹² Sadie S. & Tyrrell J., p. 771.

¹³ Jensen, E. F. (2001). *Schumann*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 166.

¹⁴ Taylor, T. D. *Aesthetic and Cultural Issues in Schumann's Kinderszenen*. "International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music", 1990, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 169.

¹⁵ For more about rejected pieces see Polanski, R., *The Rejected Kinderszenen of Robert Schumann's opus 15*, "Journal of the American Musicological Society", 1978, vol. 1, no. 31, p. 126-131.

¹⁶ Schumann finally published a cycle of thirteen pieces in September 1839.

¹⁷ Weissweiler, E. (ed.) (1994). *The Complete Correspondence of Clara and Robert Schumann vol. 1*. New York: Peter Lang, p. 123-124.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 225.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 149.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 123.

²¹ Perenyi, E. (1974). *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*. 1. ed., Boston: Brown, p. 135.

Despite the positive response of Schumann's companions, the public reaction was not so warm. Simple formal and technical structure made the cycle uninteresting for the audience and some reviews didn't even take it seriously. «Schumann had set upon his piano a howling child and sought to give a realistic imitation of its tones» wrote the Berlin critic Ludwig Rellstab in "Vossische Zeitung". Schumann, offended by his comment, mentioned it in his letter to Heinrich Dörner:

He thinks, forsooth, that I set up a sobbing child, and sought for music in his tears. It's just the reverse. Still I don't deny that I had a few childish heads in my eye while composing; but the titles, of course, did not occur to me till afterwards, and are merely hints for the execution and conception of the music.²²

Though not all critics were so negative. As pointed composer Carl Kossmaly in his review in "Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung" in 1844:

The composer had succeeded in immersing himself so completely in certain moods, states, and memorable moments of the child's world and in possessing it musically to such a degree that a thoughtful visitor must feel more intensely moved and vividly impressed by it.²³

In the following years, *Kinderszenen* became very popular especially because of its seventh part *Träumerei*. As a representative example of the idea of romantic aesthetic, it was modified and transcribed many times and even today is one of Schumann's most famous compositions.

Moreover, it is also a good example of one of the 19th century phenomenon which is merging of distinctions between aesthetically pleasing art and low, consuming art.²⁴

4) The structure of the cycle

Although *Kinderszenen* can be considered as a selection from original set of 30 pieces, it's actually a very well balanced and coherent work. As well as *Dauidsbüldertänze op. 6*, *Carnaval op. 9* or *Kreisleriana op. 16*, *Kinderszenen* are great example of work which is integral and well organised primarily as a whole.

The main key of the cycle is G major, which appears in *Vom fremden Ländern und Menschen*, *Fürchtenmachen* and at the last piece *Der Dichter Spricht* (No. 1, 10, 13) and could be presented as a tonal "frame" of the cycle. The tonal plan of other compositions is spread between D major, h minor, A major, F major, C major, g-flat minor and e minor – keys closely related to the G major.

The main unifying element of the cycle is its 'Main Motif'²⁵ of the rising sixth with a four note falling figure.²⁶ It appears in *Vom fremden Ländern und Menschen*, *Curiose Geschichte*, *Bittendes Kind* and *Fürchtenmachen* (examples no. 1a, 2a, 2b, 2c) and then in transposition in the *Glückes genug*, *Träumerei* and *Ritter vom Steckenpferd* (3a, 3b, 3c).²⁷

²² Dong, X. (2006) *Themes of Childhood: A Study of Robert Schumann's Piano Music for Children*, Doctoral Thesis. University of Cincinnati, p. 47.

²³ Ibid, p. 51, cited in Kosmally, C., *On Robert Schumann's piano compositions (1844)* In: R. Schumann and his world. Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1994. p. 311.

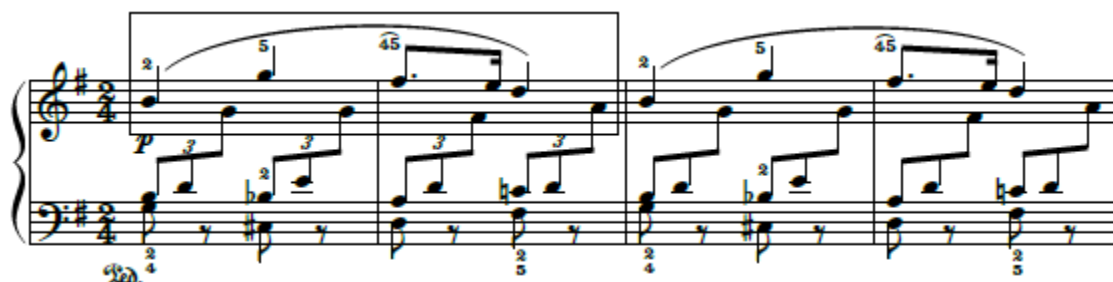
²⁴ See Ottlová M., Pospíšil M. (1997), *Proměny hudby v městské společnosti*, In: *Bedřich Smetana a jeho doba*. Praha: NLN, p. 36-45.

²⁵ Dong, X. p. 54. Reti, R. (1961). *Schumann's Kinderszenen: A Theme with Variations*, in *The Thematic Process in Music*, London: Faber & Faber, p. 31-55.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

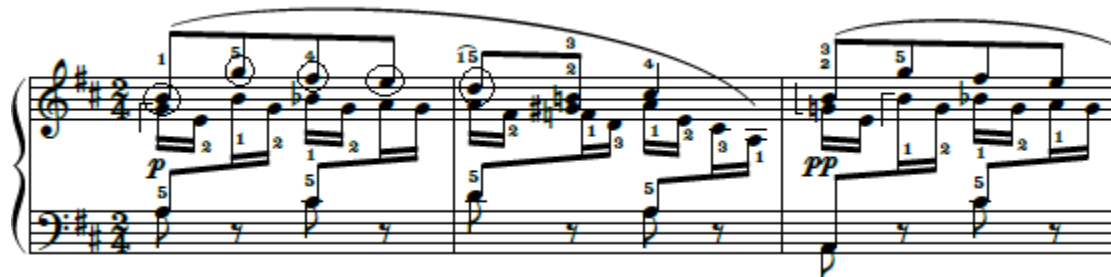
Ex. 1a, Schumann op. 15, *Von fremden Ländern und Menschen* (bars no. 1-4, “Main Motif”)



Ex. 2a, Schumann op. 15, *Curiose Geschichte* (bars no. 1-4)



Ex. 2b, Schumann op. 15, *Bittendes Kind* (bars no. 1-3)



Ex. 2c, Schumann op. 15, *Füchtermachen* (bars no. 1-8)



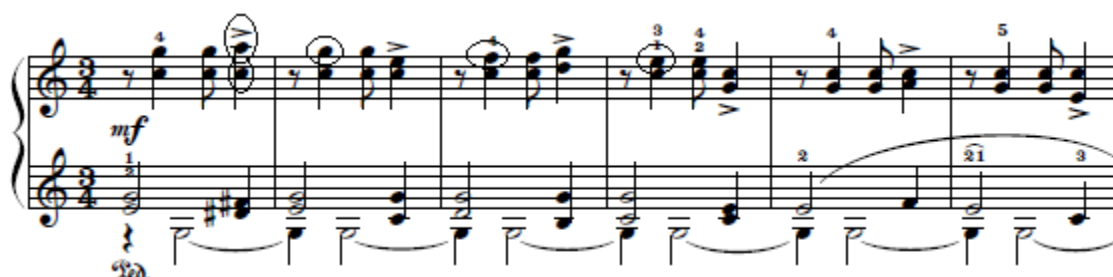
Ex. 3a, Schumann op. 15, *Wichtige Begebenheit* (bars no. 1-4)



Ex. 3b, Schumann op. 15, *Träumerei* (bars no. 1-4)



Ex. 3c, Schumann op. 15, *Ritter von Steckenpferd* (bars no. 1-6)



Very coherent is also the order of the pieces. Lively *Hasche-Man*, *Glückes genug*, *Ritter vom Steckenpferd* and *Fürchtermachen* (No. 2, 4, 9, 11) are interleaved with more melancholic parts *Bittendes Kind*, *Träumerei*, *Fast zu Ernst* and *Der Dichter spricht* (No. 4, 7, 10, 13). Pieces *Von fremden Ländern und Menschen*, *Curiose Geschichte*, *Wichtige Begebenheit*, *Am Camin* and *Kind in Einschlummen* (No. 1, 2, 6, 8, 12) have ambivalent character, because they combine briskness and tranquillity.²⁸ Moreover, *Bittendes Kind* and *Glückes genug* (No. 4, 5) as well as *Kind im Einschlummern* and *Der Dichter spricht* (No. 12, 13) intended to be inseparable pairs.²⁹

The final piece *Der Dichter spricht* is – from the perspective of the whole cycle – unique.

As pointed Réti: «[...] we see that in this number 13, for the first time in *Kinderszenen* the main theme of a piece is not the prime thought of the work but merely a variant, a truly new version of it.»³⁰ Although it's a postlude, this piece opens a new dimension of the work and simultaneously refers to Schumann's other, literary self. The title *Der Dichter spricht*

²⁸ Dong, p. 54.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Réti, R. (1961), *Thematic Process in Music*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, p. 31-55. Taylor, T. D. (1990), *Aesthetic and Cultural Issues in Schumann's Kinderszenen*. In: "International Review of the Aesthetic and Sociology of Music," 1990, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 175.

is so significant; why a poet, instead of a composer?³¹ That's why this piece, in its own way, is an integral part of the cycle and simultaneously an autonomy composition which oversteps it.

Another interesting aspect of *Kinderszenen* is the dynamic markings. It's mostly marked piano or pianissimo, only in *Wichtige Begebenheit* (No. 6) and a small section of *Fürchtenmachen* (No. 11) is marked fortissimo or forte. Hence the listening of the cycle requires a deep concentration and can evoke very tense atmosphere and there is no doubt, that Schumann conceived this work primarily as unified whole, whose individual segments linked to one another.

5) Different ways of interpretation

In the world of piano romantic music, *Kinderszenen* holds a particular place. Although its seventh part, famous *Träumerei*, is one of the most celebrated and known music composition ever, the cycle as a whole is performed occasionally. From the technical view not difficult, *Kinderszenen* may look too simple and hence not attractive for pianists. This fact, however, is quite clear composer's intention and it's well balanced by the complex structure of the work, which can be heard only when all thirteen pieces are performed.

5.1) Vladimir Horowitz

Besides several recordings from a live concerts, Horowitz officially recorded *Kinderszenen* only twice – in 1950 and 1962. The second one is more famous and it's mostly the part of various collections of Horowitz's music.³²

The main element of his interpretation is the way he emphasis the major melodic line.

It's always dominant regardless it's located in the upper-voice, inner voices or in the bass line. According to that, other voices are muted as much as possible; especially in the slow pieces as *Bittendes Kind* (No. 3) and *Träumerei* (No. 7) or lyrical *Kind in Einschlummern* and *Der Dichter spricht* (No. 12, 13). Accordingly, chosen dynamics is mostly piano except *Glückes genug* (No. 5) and *Ritter vom Steckenpferd* (no. 9), where Horowitz plays *mezzoforte*. The tempo of whole cycle is quite fast, which is especially in some lyric pieces - for example opening *Von fremden Ländern und Menschen* – a little bit uncommon.

Moreover, the tempo is always very stable, Horowitz uses rarely *ritardando* nor other agogic elements and more than through dynamics and tempo, he tries to express the character of each piece through the sound. His typical, gentle timbre is most significant in slow pieces, where he's able to very delicate *pianissimo* even in deeper octave (*Kind in Einschlummern*, No. 12).

5.2) Ivan Moravec

Ivan Moravec³³, whose recording of *Kinderszenen* from 1987 was mentioned – in connection with Schumann's 200th anniversary in 2010 – in Gramophone magazine, concentrates, as well as Horowitz, mainly on the leading melody. What makes his interpretation different is the attention he pays on other voices, especially the inner melodies and left hand accompaniment. The final sound is more compact; Moravec also works more with *crescendo* and *decrescendo* though general dynamic schedule is rather

³¹ Ibid, p. 161.

³² Vladimir Horowitz, *The Complete Original Jacket Collection*, CD no. 4, Schumann & Chopin, 1949/1950, RCA Victor Red Seal.

³³ Ivan Moravec, *Moravec Plays Schumann & Franck*, 2001, Supraphon (originally recorded in 1989).

low. The only exceptions are *Glückes genug* (No. 5) and *Wichtige Begebenheit* (No. 6), where louder dynamic helps him illustrate the character of the pieces. The tempo of almost every piece could be described as traditional. Moravec's interpretation is very coherent, he doesn't emphasize any of single pieces of the cycle. He's also very precise in the diction of every phrase as well as in articulation, which is sometimes more 'sharp' than Horowitz's, for example in *Hasche-man* (No. 2). More than in detail, his interpretation is unique from the perspective of entire cycle – in Moravec case very well proportioned.

5.3) Lang Lang

Chinese pianist Lang Lang recorded *Kinderszenen* in 2005 for his first solo debut for Deutsche Grammophon.³⁴ Compare to other two, his interpretation is most daring.

Significant element of his play is extremely fast tempo of some pieces, especially *Hasche-Man* (No. 2) and *Ritter vom Steckenpferd* (No. 10), which thanks to that loses its suggestive 'swinging' character. In slow, poetic parts Lang Lang works a lot with agogics. Particularly in trio *Träumerei* (No. 7), *Kind in Einschlummern* (No. 12) and *Der Dichter spricht* (No. 13) he plays so much *ritardando*, that the music almost stops. In the context of these very short pieces it's a little bit eccentric. On the other side it's especially in these parts, where his masterly work with sound could be heard the most. His *pianissimo* is so delicate and fragile, that it's almost inaudible and its sound quality – even in so low dynamic – is admirable. Lang Lang's *Kinderszenen* are in many ways very unorthodox, but certainly interesting and typical for current music trends.

6) Conclusion

For Schumann, childhood was not only one of the happiest parts of his own life, but also lifelong source of inspiration. He loved and adored children and their view of the world even before he had his own kids. As he wrote in 1833: «In every child is found a wondrous depth.»³⁵

His *Kinderszenen op. 15* – although at first sight very simple – have very complex structure, sophisticated construction and deep meaning, which makes them special not only within Schumann's other piano work, but also in the whole context of romantic piano music.

Persistent tendency to evaluate composer's talent and genius through his greatest works is still very common in the world of professional musicians and may be one of the reasons why *Kinderszenen* still stands out of the interest of many pianists, who primarily want to attract the audience.

The aim of this essay was to show not only the inspirational sources and the development of the composition, but also its uniqueness especially as a whole. The part devoted to the different ways of interpretation intended to point out how some of the most respected pianists of our time dealt with it and how different their interpretations are and – as inspiration for contemporary artists – could be.

³⁴ Lang Lang, *Memory*, Deutsche Grammophon 2005.

³⁵ Jensen, p. 337. Schumann, A. (1971) *Der Junge Schumann: Dichtungen und Briefe*, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, p. 30.