

Robert Schumann, "The Prophet Bird" (No. 7 from „Forest Scenes“ op. 82)

Some Ideas and Performance Pointers by Wolf-Dieter Seiffert

© 2010

There is only one bird that is believed, from ancient times, to possess a prophetic gift to foretell the future or bring good luck. It is the shy cuckoo that cries only in the springtime¹. Its cry, usually a short downward minor third, is very well hidden in Schumann's composition "The Prophet Bird", hidden so well that nobody noticed it until now². For example, the cuckoo cries throughout the main motif, across both hands (c \sharp – bb'; etc.) or, markedly accentuated by *fp*, in mm. 15 and 39: a' – f \sharp '. In the same main motif the nervous agility of the bird seems to be imitated, the way it flits up and down branches, "always alert", ever "lively and spirited" (so written by Schumann into his holograph, with Joseph von Eichendorff's words, and originally intended as a motto for the "The Prophet Bird").

And yet, Schumann, in "The Prophet Bird" does not at all intend to imitate birdsong with music. Quite in contrast to, for example, "Hunter's Song", the piece to follow in the "Forest Scenes", in which the sound of horns and the hunters' shouts, the gallop of the horses and the barks of the dogs are so clear and feel near. I would postulate that in "The Prophet Bird" he is not in the least attempting a description of nature³. The opposite is true; "The Prophet Bird" converts an unexpected transcendental occurrence, an inner process so to speak, into enchanting sound.

For this reason I think that "The Prophet Bird" goes far beyond the overall more modest nine piano pieces of the "Forest Scenes" op. 82, and even holds a singular position within the entire piano repertoire of Schumann. Apart from its cryptic title that has already challenged countless attempts at interpretation Schumann, in this short piece, confronts two musical positions that could not possibly be more juxtaposed and at the same time more "descriptive", completely without the use of words. A simple, sonorous chorale setting forms the central part, surrounded by an austere mixture of dissonance and harmony in quiet and restless discant. However, the outer parts do not at all surround a foreign body, but rather the core of the composition.

We, who listen, spellbound, to the bird, are strongly attracted to the apparent autonomy of his language as "song" and chirping. The musical elements and, thus, the expression of this disturbingly attractive experience of something strange and foreign are quickly described (and easily explained from the musical text). Here you have the restless, almost flighty figurations of the right hand that never becomes a graspable melody line; the sharp dissonances (tritone, major seventh, diminished octaves) that soothingly mingle with ordinary and expanded triads; the mostly treble register without the (anchoring) bass; the Saraband character (with upbeat) that is immediately taken aback by the "wrong" metre (4/4) and by the irregular prolongation of some phrases; and finally, the soft and at the same time "dangerous" pianissimo that Schumann directs to be played "slowly and very tenderly".

And then, unexpectedly stepping out from the fascinatingly strange background sound of the pleasing bird and forest noise, the intense listener experiences a revelation, a higher truth. Unprepared (and to be continued in the same tempo) the middle section begins, and only for a short moment (six measures; the two surrounding parts are 18 measures each) nature reveals itself to the devout listener as a divine, eternally joy-filled space⁴.

1 Goethe's poem Frühlingsorakel from the collection „Gesellige Lieder“ significantly begins with the lines: „You prophetic bird, you. Blossom singer, Cuckoo!“

2 Overlooked also by the numerous authors of the article: Musik als religiöse Botschaft oder als offene Metapher? Schumanns „Vogel als Prophet“ – kontrovers gespielt und gedeutet; in: Ute Jung-Kaiser (editor), Der Wald als romantischer Topos, Bern etc. [Peter Lang Verlag] 2008. This monograph volume is an especially rewarding read: Peter Jost, Robert Schumanns „Waldszenen“ op. 82. Zum Thema „Wald“ in der romantischen Klaviermusik, Saarbrücken 1989.

3 In this context I recommend the following short, wonderful film clip with Olivier Messiaen as both composer and ornithologist: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkKrD9knBvU&NR=1>

4 Already the first critic of the piece intuitively grasped the serendipity of the moment, and writes: „here you hear chirping, there humming, and oh how beautifully does the sound of song emerge from the thick hedges! That is the ‚bird as a prophet‘, as a good prophet, for he speaks of joy, and that to me is the best wisdom“. (Anonymus in: Signale für die musikalische Welt Nr. 51 [1850], as quoted by Peter Jost, S. 291).

The forest bird, in a manner of speaking, opens the true listener's ears to the essence of hearing. He becomes one with nature, understands it without words or concept, yet not in a pantheistic sense, but in the Christian sense. The musical expression of this elevated moment of joy is the change of almost all hitherto valid parameters: a chorale setting (together with a contrapuntal imitating tenor voice) or at least the idiom of a chorale in four voices; regular tempo and rhythm; G major with a proper cadenza; sonorous (middle) range with fundamental bass notes.

In this middle section Schumann quotes, and certainly not as a coincidence, a part from his "Scenes from Goethe's Faust" that he composed at about the same time, namely the "Chor Seliger Knaben" (the quote is underlined)⁵:

PATER SERAPHICUS, mittlere Region.
Welch ein Morgenwölkchen schwebet
Durch der Tannen schwankend Haar?
Ahn ich, Was im Innern lebet?
Es ist junge Geisterschar.

CHOR SELIGER KNABEN.
Sag uns, Vater, wo wir wallen,
Sag uns, Guter, wer wir sind!
Glücklich sind wir: allen, allen
Ist das Dasein so gelind.
Sag uns, Vater, wo wir wallen,
sag uns, Guter, wer wir sind.

You can listen to this part of the composition [HERE](#) ◀.

Simply for inspiration, I added the lyrics to the music in the new Urtext edition: [Sample pages](#).

This quote hasn't been discovered by musicological research before, and is tempting to follow up on and further interpret (but the urge must for now be suppressed). Allow me only a short comment with reference to Schumann's rather mysterious title: Goethe's cloisterly hermit "Father Seraphicus" of course stands for the holy saint Francis of Assisi, who, it is known, was able to talk with the birds. And the idiom of a chorale⁶ (what the "Seligen Knaben" are singing) again was an obvious choice for Schumann because of the very Christian turn the end of Faust II takes, a fact that Goethe himself described to Eckermann: "By the way you will admit that the end, in which the saved soul is on its way back up, was very difficult to do, and that I could easily have lost myself in vagaries in dealing with such supernatural, hardly tangible things, had I not given my poetic intention charitably limiting form and weight through the clearly defined Christian ecclesiastic characters and ideas."⁷

What I think is more decisive in this much discussed middle part of the piano piece is less the self-quote-like adoption of the "supernatural" Faust scene than, much more, the precisely composed religiously connotated moment of joy in this passage. Suddenly, effortlessly the listener, intent on hearing the forest and bird sounds, "understands" everything for one single moment. The forest opens to him like a dome (an analogy that is quite common since the romantic period) filled with the sound of a "chorale" in G major. In the sense of a "prophecy" God himself speaks to the enrapt one, he speaks through nature, through the bird and forest sounds. In the famous E flat major passage (m. 24) this moment that compares to an epiphany, fades, and we stand again with the listener amidst the unintelligible chirping of the birds.

The importance of the pedal markings

Schumann's piano works contain relatively little specific pedal notations (in comparison, for instance, with Chopin's music notations). Often a piece will merely have one general indication at the beginning of the music, like: "pedal" (see "Davidsbündler" op. 6, "Carnaval" op. 9, "Symphonic Etudes op. 13, "Novellettes"

5 Dritte Abteilung, Faust Verklärung, III. Welch ein Morgenwölkchen schwebet (Clara Schumann's Complete Edition of Schumann's Oeuvre, pp. 186 ff., the place in question at „A“ ff.).

6 This is an idiom, and exactly not copied out of an existing text (possibly a mass by Schubert).

7 Johann Peter Eckermann, Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens [Insel Verlag], Frankfurt 2006.

op. 21 etc.). At the beginning of the sonata op. 11 in f sharp minor we find an explanation by Schumann for the presumably general meaning of the indication "pedal/pedale" written in measure 1: "The editors [= Florestan und Eusebius] apply pedalling to more or less all measures depending on the given harmonies. Exceptions, where no pedalling is desired, are marked * ; as soon as the sign "Pedale" appears, constant use of the pedal is to be resumed." (quote from the Henle Urtext edition, [order number HN 337](#)).

Completely different, and therefore something special, valuable and to be heeded is the authentic pedal notation in "The Prophet Bird"! All the measures of this piece, and only of this piece, are meticulously and precisely marked with pedal-engage and pedal-release signs. To study or simply view Schumann's autograph click [HERE](#). Hardly a pianist respects Schumann's pedal instructions. Why not? Because they are very unusual (and possibly need some adaptation for modern pianos), and because no one ever paid attention to them. But that is wrong.

What happens when Schumann's pedal instructions in "The Prophet Bird" are taken seriously? First of all, incredibly artful, mysterious sound combinations occur, made of (common) triads with subtly disturbing, darker dissonances. The pedaled sound takes off from the dissonance note on measure one, only to be followed by a stable, quickly flicked triad with the leading note solution which is one octave higher. All with one pedal. Secondly, these harmonies softly fade into the rests, exactly as Schumann instructs (* a f t e r the rest signs). A rest does not necessarily mean silence. Quite the opposite in "The Prophet Bird", here the constant rests are filled with sound, the forest is not still, the listener is spellbound by the lingering sounds. And thirdly, the very few passages without pedal marks sound clearer, more sober (and in mm 25/26 more surprising) than their surroundings (the middle part presumably remained without pedal marks, because it is absolutely clear where you need the pedal in the slurred chorale part). Almost unique in Schumann's piano oeuvre, and therefore a true emphasis on the importance of the pedal instructions in this piece is the "una corda" in mm 23/24.

So, Schumann is serious about his pedal instructions in "The Prophet Bird". Why aren't the musicians?

Rhythm

Before one begins to practice the piece one must be clear about the intended execution of the main motif that recurs many dozens of times and determines the movement. To wit, Schumann made an orthographic mistake in writing the notation for the motif. Consequently, you will hear pianists play either (a), (b) or (c):



There is, I believe, no right or wrong solution to this problem. I play the figure (but not consistently) as fast as possible (usually option c), for then the fast notes simply serve as an "incidental" filling of the chord for the creation of the intended pedal sound. The beginning and end note are emphasized. When played in triplets (a) I think the figure becomes rhythmically too important; (b) might be a good compromise. The fact that Schumann quite often made mistakes in writing exact notations for dotted rhythms might serve as a more neutral point of reasoning for the tendency towards solution b+c. The correct notation with a silent tie or too many beamed notes seems to have cost him too much effort. Had he really intended triplets the completion of the "3" would have been relatively effortless. Please take the final stretta of the "Humoreske" op. 20 in B flat major (from m. 952 ff.) as an example for Schumann's insecurity (or lack of diligence). Here Schumann chooses exactly the same mistake in notation as in our piece, but could hardly have intended triplets, alone the tempo does not allow any other assumption. (Another remarkable passage, by the way, is also the dotted main motif of the wonderful waltz "Intermezzo" in the third movement of the op. 11 sonata, mm. 147 ff. etc; ref. detailed comment in the Henle Urtext edition).

Fingerings

I always experienced practical problems especially with the rhythmically dodgy main figure when I attempted to follow the fingerings of the Henle edition (avoidance of the thumb on the black key). I stumbled in passing the thumb under, and single notes were easily left out. To me it is beyond questioning that Schumann intended

even this piece for the thumb to consistently glide from the black to the white key followed by a fast and silent change of fingers (5 -> 1). Yes, I even believe he created the piece from the idea of this special position of the hand. Likewise, many of his original fingerings (they are all included in the Henle edition in italics) reveal the lively use of this "thumb gliding technique" (one of many possible examples is the "Verrufene Stelle" in m. 14 of the "Forest Scenes", or also the beginning of no. 1 in "Album for the Young" etc.). Some time ago I came across an [edition of "The Prophet Bird" by the great pianist Leopold Godowsky](#), therein the last pages). Indeed, it terribly deforms Schumann's original text, but the fingerings, especially with the gliding thumb, work well for me (and I assume for other piano players as well). So I adopted this fingering and optimized it somewhat.⁸ You can view and print the result [HERE](#) and then try it out for yourself.

⁸ So I play some passages, actually already the very beginning, divided between two hands; that makes my play more confident. And in the reverse, you feel the strongly dissonant septimas in measure 25 much better when you play both notes with your left hand etc.