

Christian Gerhaher and Gerold Huber on Robert Schumann, Liederkreis op. 39

Summary of the Interview
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Gerold Huber and Christian Gerhaher
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Question: Within the general song repertoire, where do you rank Schumann's "Liederkreis" op. 39?

Christian Gerhaher: I personally regard Schumann's "Eichendorff-Lieder", alongside Schumann's "Schöne Müllerin", as the high point of all cyclic song composition. It is without a doubt my favourite "song cycle".

Question: What are the reasons?

Gerhaher: Well, for one there are the truly exceptional lyric poems that Schumann set the music to. After all, Schumann congenially complements Eichendorff's "voice" like no other; Hugo Wolff for example, at a later time, was less successful. We know that Eichendorff himself heard Schumann's music setting and was pleased, even enthusiastic. In addition the 12 individual songs, as great as each is for itself, appear to me to reach a higher

degree of richness, exactly because they are embedded in the context of a cycle, and each stands or can be viewed in relation to the others.

Gerold Huber: I find it fascinating what superb poetry was created in Schumann's times and how unerringly he chose the very best for his music. In the beginnings of the 1840s it was all there for the taking and Schumann took advantage of that: he composed over 200 songs as if in euphoric elation. In contrast to many other composers of his time (including Brahms) who tended to use second-rate texts, Schumann had a highly sensitive radar for the highest quality of poetry and lyrics.

Question: You just mentioned the importance of the cycle. Is it tolerable, or more specifically, do you take the liberty of singing songs from the Schumann cycle singly, perhaps as an encore?

Gerhaher: Never with the "Liederkreis". These are 12 songs composed in subtle and dramatic sequence. You need to hear them one after the other. Of course it is at first a bit unsettling to discover from your new Urtext edition that Schumann actually had some songs like "Mondnacht" copied and gave them away as single songs. But you have to consider that Schumann's times did not have an established tradition of performing song cycles as complete and closed units. That came later.

I am sure it would make Schumann very happy to know that his cycles are performed together today

Huber: I am sure it would make Schumann very happy to know that his cycles are performed together today. It perfectly corresponds to his concept. The traditions of music performance during his times simply didn't allow that; in this regard he was way ahead of his time.

Gerhaher: In this context I would like also to mention other song cycles where you are first inclined to wonder what caused Schumann to string together such disparate songs. For example, the Andersen-Lieder Opus 40, the Lenau-Lieder with "Requiem" Opus 90 or the Kulmann-Lieder Opus 104. They all need to be performed together, perhaps it's even more necessary than for Opus 24 and 42, exactly because of the order is so disturbing (especially towards the end of each cycle).

Question: The cyclic theme is already wonderfully accomplished and unfolded in Schumann's early piano oeuvre (I'd like to refer to "Kinderszenen" op. 15, to mention only one example, but there are many more). Is this a corresponding theme that connects the two genres or forms of composition?

Gerhaher: Absolutely. Don't you think it's truly noteworthy that he, the poet who was long undecided whether he should not rather become a writer and maker of verses, and founded a music journal and did indeed continue to write throughout his life, that Schumann, in his early years of creating music, exclusively composed for the piano? No songs, but literature and poetry speak from every piano note he wrote? I believe that, from the very beginning, literature was the decisive concept in his music, but that he did not at all need song in the beginning. That changed abruptly, even tremendously with Opus 24. I would say that Schumann, in reverse to Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words", always had words at the back of his mind when he composed instrumental pieces.

Question: Let us return once more to the texts opus 39 are based on. Schumann changed Eichendorff's lyrics, albeit only in small details, but he did make some alterations here and there. The phrasings in the Henle Urtext edition are those that Schumann set the music to, any differences from the original are compared in the preface. An especially marked example is a passage in the song entitled "Wehmut": the original reads: "Thus nightingales let sound from their cage's vault ..."; Schumann changes the words to "Nightingales let sound from their dungeon's vault ...". What is your opinion on the text?

I think it's great that we now finally have the original text that Schumann set the music to

Gerhaher: To start, I think it's great that we now finally have the original text that Schumann set the music to. Older editions confuse the versions, some even use Eichendorff's original, assuming that Schumann simply made a mistake. That is most certainly not the case. When he revised the music in 1850 Schumann paid attention to even the minutest orthographic elements, and sometimes changed them. That needs to be taken very seriously.

Question: How seriously do you take the first printed version from 1842 that we published in the new Henle edition?

Gerhaher: With all due respect, I must admit that I will not sing the early version. The later revision is so much better. Just listen to "Froher Wandersmann". It is the opening song of the early version, but it's a very problematic song. It is not even included in the later cycle. My personal favourite song out of this cycle, "In der Fremde", is by far the better opening song for the cycle.

Question: Schumann did intend "In der Fremde" for the first print version, but Clara found it to be too bleak ...

Huber: What I also appreciate about your edition is that it is so exact and makes it possible to discover all the relevant background information regarding the cycle. But I also cannot imagine that we would play the early version, not even the very different versions of "Mondnacht" and "Frühlingsnacht" that are included in your edition. The final, approved versions are simply so superior to the earlier ones.

Question: Mr Gerhaher, you are a baritone singer. Most Schumann songs are written for soprano or tenor ranges. What to do?

Gerhaher: Well, I think that one of the most crucial aspects about singing Schumann songs is to maintain a certain degree of naturalness, a manner of singing that does not sound strained. The ideal range might well have been the tenor voice for Schumann, especially during the period when he was studying Schubert. Today that has changed. A tenor singer, who, as a student, will have worked hard at reaching the high range does appear to me to sound artificial in song, and is ultimately out of place.

Question: Couldn't it be that Schumann purposely meant to push the voice to its limits, and intended a sort of stressed sound in his composition?

Gerhaher: That doesn't make sense to me at all. Quite the opposite; in the early 1840s he simply had no real knowledge of the human voice, its range of expression, the whole subject matter.

Huber: Undoubtedly he would be very happy with the situation today where the Schumann songs are mostly performed by baritone singers. Of course, we do have to make some transpositions here and there to make it sound good.



Question: Which pieces from the "Liederkreis" do you transpose?

Huber: The first and last songs remain in the original, because that is the only way to round off the tonality of the cycle (No. 1 in F sharp minor, No. 12 in F sharp major). Likewise, "Zwielicht", followed "attacca"-like by „Im Walde", must correspond in tone. I'd say we leave five songs in their original range, and transpose the remaining seven. It's well-solved in the Friedländer edition published by C.F. Peters.

Gerhaher: If Henle would consider publishing transposed editions for middle ranges – and I personally regard that as necessary if you want to persist in the market – then I strongly advise you follow the Friedländer edition. It does have some weak spots, but regarding pitch, it's exemplary. In contrast, the new Schubert edition by Bärenreiter is unfortunately truly useless in regards to the transpositions.

Huber: Many, actually most pianists, are able to transpose prima vista, or will at least prepare themselves for song accompaniment beforehand. I am not so sure whether a separate printed "middle voice" edition of Schumann's songs is really necessary. But what really does not go is to wildly and wilfully transpose away, without regard to the context.

Question: It is known of other singers that they are a bit frightened by the "Liederkreis". It is generally regarded as extremely difficult to sing. What are your feelings?

Schumann sets high demands on singers and pianists

Gerhaher: I feel the same. The two of us, Gerold Huber and I, have maybe once or twice after playing/singing been able to say, "yes, that is exactly the way it needs to be done", and this number includes our rehearsals. Schumann sets high demands on singers and pianists. "Auf einer Burg", for example – that's the highest level of difficulty. No piano prelude, hardly a real pause for breathing, such an unbelievable feeling of emptiness and apathy that needs to be conveyed ("Greisengesang" by Schubert is just as hard). Or, "Im Walde", possibly the most genial piece out of the entire cycle; it's easy to sing, technically. But musically, the nearness and distance, the difficulty of bringing it across, of conveying the heart of it, that's the challenge. "Mondnacht", though, that most singers are especially in awe of, I find rather easier to sing, as long as your voice hits the calmness and vastness. Of course the high pitches can cause a problem, and then the piano has to go along well and also support the sound structure ...



from the left: Dr. Annette Oppermann, Prof. Christian Gerhaher, Dr. Wolf-Dieter Seiffert and Gerold Huber

Huber: Every singer has his own ideas about "Mondnacht". You have to seriously concern yourself with these things. "Mondnacht" stands alone in the cycle; it has the longest prelude and postlude.

There is a lot of responsibility in the piano part. And, as I learned from the new Henle edition, Eichendorff's text is taken from the "Geistliche Lieder" (spiritual songs). You have to take this context, that seems foreign to us today, into account, too.

The questions were asked by Dr. Annette Oppermann and Dr. Wolf-Dieter Seiffert.