

Phone interview with Dr. Michael Struck

on Schumann's metronome markings

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Dr. Michael Struck

Question: Are the printed metronome markings in Schumann's works really „correct“?

Answer: Yes, it is secured that they are correct:

Firstly, Schumann's metronome was not broken. Though Clara Schumann did state in 1855 in an article in a journal that her husband's metronome had been broken, she took that statement back to 95% in the same journal some years later, in 1864, when she said that there had merely been some minor differences between the different metronomes used. The story about the broken metronome is untrue.

Secondly, of course we cannot rule out that occasional metronome markings were falsely printed and left uncorrected, but all in all a clear development, or tendency, is evident, and this fact alone is an argument in favour of the correctness of Schumann's metronome: In Schumann's early pieces the slow movements appear to us to be marked much too fast, and in the late pieces we regard the lively movements as marked too slow.

Question: Were the markings really made by Schumann himself?

A: Yes, without a doubt. Schumann proofread all of his works. The case is somewhat different however with "Kinderszenen": We know from a written reference from Schumann's friend Böhme that the metronome markings were not by Schumann. And yet, they are authorized, for Schumann did not correct them in, let alone remove them from, any of the later

editions (though he did make other corrections). And Böhme, by the way, added his own metronome markings to the "Kinderszenen", and they are even faster!

Q: Could it be that Schumann (and Böhme) simply confused the reference value, for example could they have intended eighths instead of fourths? For instance Schumann set the tempo of the "Träumerei" at quarter note = 100 (a very fast tempo). Böhme went as far as writing quarter note = 132. But if you divide that in half, namely eighths in place of fourths, then you are approaching "today's" tempo of the "Träumerei".

A: That is an interesting hypothesis, but it doesn't work. For, even Clara Schumann, in her „instructive edition“ set the tempo for „Träumerei“ at quarter note = 80.

Rather, my proposition is that Schumann (and his contemporaries) interpreted „slow“ to be a more fluent, not halting tempo, all in all more lively than today. And that was not only caused by the instruments that were used, and that faded out faster.

Q: Tempo is not equal to speed. In music tempo has the quality of flexibility, but is still something that quite decisively determines the character of the piece. So, do I understand correctly that you appeal to the musicians to take Schumann's original metronome markings more seriously?

A: Yes, I urgently suggest taking a closer look. Not by letting the metronome tick while one plays, but by attempting to play the pieces as close as possible in the tempo intended by Schumann. A point that appears important to me is also that Schumann noted several "ritardandi". How can you really become slower if your basic tempo is already too slow?