

# From deep sleep to MM 100

## Some thoughts on Robert Schumann's "Träumerei" (Reverie)

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In the same way that "Liebelei" (flirtation) is not "Liebe" (love), "Träumerei" (reverie) is not "Traum" (a dream). Before one starts to play Robert Schumann's probably most famous piano composition from the "Children's Scenes" cycle, it's good to have a closer look at the title and the tempo instructions.

"Träumerei" or, in English: reverie – what is that actually? Let's detour by way of the aforementioned term "Liebelei". In German, the suffix "-lei" turns the word "Liebe" (love) into a featherweight, transient, unimportant, in cases annoying incident. In German the addition of the suffix "-lei", "-rei" or "-ei", added to certain words changes the quality of that term, and immediately an important or beautiful thing is depreciated: Kind/Kinderei – child/childishness, Spiel/Spielerei – play/foolish play, Traum/Träumerei – dream/reverie or daydream.

Allow me to quote an article from the "German Dictionary" of the Brothers Grimm. Their definition of "Träumerei" reads as follows: "phantastic and therefore meaningless thoughts and ideas", but also "imaginative, but not completely meaningless, rather quite serious and moreover interesting, sentimental or romantic thoughts and ideas" – "accompanied by or conditioned by absent-mindedness."

So then, the reverie is the featherweight, fleeting, yes possibly slightly annoying younger sister of a "real" dream. A reverie – we would most likely substitute the wonderfully romantic expression with "daydream" – is a quiet, momentary escape from the real world.

And how do you express that in music? It's probably best not to lay too much depth, portentous gravity and weight into it. After all, a daydreamer is not a deep sleeper. Technically that means to avoid strong rubati. (Schumann specifies a "ritardando" only in the three instances, where parts meet.) And one shouldn't excessively linger on the "sweet passages", otherwise you might risk the daydreamer falling asleep. (Schumann notes only one fermate, namely shortly before the end!)

But over the course of time, Schumann's "Träumerei" has become the most portentous piece of the romantic period. It tends to be arduously stretched out and wistfully indulged. But that was not Schumann's intention, as we can already discern from the meaning of the title. And there is another tiny indicator in favour of lightness vs. weightiness; Schumann's metronome marking reads "♩ = 100", and that is truly surprisingly lively. The original metronome markings are often blamed on broken metronomes. However, the Schumann researcher Michael Struck verified in two current publications that the legend of Schumann's malfunctioning metronome is a musicological myth that should be thrown into a historic rubbish bin rather sooner than later.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Henle Urtext edition rightly instructs the musician to play ♩ = 100, and Schumann intended it that way or at least close to that. It is Clara Schumann's fault that the basic tempi – that do give the impression of being quite fast – are often not taken seriously, especially those of the "Children's Scenes". Certainly the metronome markings should not be dwelled on beyond proportion, but they need to be basically taken into consideration.

Lastly Schumann intended the basic pulse to be ♩ = 100 and not ♩ = 50. He calls the piece "Träumerei" (Reverie) and not "Traum" (dream).

I invite you to try it out! You will find that the usual, deep sleep, portentously laden with feeling, meanders delicately like an intermezzo – exactly in the middle of the 13 "Children's Scenes" – and becomes exactly what it is meant to be, a reverie.

Schumann's daydreamer very quickly returns to reality: the close listener of the opening movement of the following piece from "Children's Scenes" is able to discover that someone is caught sitting before the fireplace.

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<sup>1</sup> „Träumerei“ und zahl-lose Probleme. Zur leidigen Tempofrage in Robert Schumanns „Kinderscenen“, in: Schumanniana nova. Festschrift Gerd Nauhaus zum 60. Geburtstag [Sinzig 2002]. And: Schumann spielen ... – Anmerkungen zur Wiedergabe der »Kinderszenen« im neuen Licht alter Metronomzahlen und zum Spiel der »Gesänge der Frühe«, in: Der späte Schumann [= Musik-Konzepte 2006].