

“The Body in a State of Music”: Roland Barthes and Robert Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze*, op.6

This thesis seeks to explore “Barthesian” resonances of embodiment, temporality and space, and reversibility in Schumann’s op.6 cycle, supported by empirical analyses of form, structure, rhythm, tonality, and harmonic organization across the pieces. The discourse is divided into three main parts: first, identifying in concrete terms how a musical body “beats” through the movements; second, exploring the musical text as multidimensional “painted space” through connections to Romantic distance archetypes; and third, understanding how musical signifying differs from language with allusions to reversibility from Barthes’ theory of the literary codes. Ultimately, this Barthesian reading of Schumann’s work reveals processes of signification beyond sequential space, thus providing listeners and readers with a plurality of divergent perspectives to unravel the work’s cross-references and musical enigmas.

The penultimate piece of Schumann’s cycle, op.6 is marked “Wie aus der Ferne”: as from a distance. At this point, after an exhaustive journey through 16 movements of heady, frenetic exuberance, pacified relaxation, and explosive restlessness, we stop before a precipice, confronted with the question: where have we been led? What comes from the distance? Is it music from afar, or from before? At this signpost, an understanding dawns. Perhaps, beyond the veneer of a musical surface that ripples with whirling and exhaustive motion, lies an underlying network that flickers with meaning - out of space, out of time - a constellation waiting to emerge to a listener’s mind.

Roland Barthes, a 20th century literary critic and theorist of semiotics, conceived of Schumann and meaning in his music unlike any other. In his essay “Rasch”, he sidesteps conventional structural music analysis, choosing instead to explain music’s motion and gestures as that of a “body that beats” - a body that “explodes, divides, pricks, stretches out, weaves, speaks...” in order to enunciate musically. This Schumannian body accumulates and transforms throughout the movements of the cycle. Barthes also sought to move music away from language, conceiving of music as expansive “radiant, painted space” different from a linguistically ordered, contrasting series of signs. It is a notion of music as an agglomerative network, that functions in multivalent dimensions through depths of time and distances in space, not limited to linear, uni-directional processes. Musical signification might be, thus, the recalling of a phrase of the past, like a musical memory, or a motivic parallelism across structural levels. This is akin to what Barthes calls the “reversible”: units in a text that do not rely on the cause-and-effect of chronology and linear time to make sense. The more reversible processes there are in a musical text, the more it signifies infinitely, opening up the listener to endless possibilities of connotation and reinterpretation.