

Perceptions and Values of the Romantic Period as Reflected in
Robert Schumann's "Davidsbündlertänze," Movements II-V

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According to The Billboard Encyclopedia of Classical Music, "the violin was the prince of the Baroque, (but) the piano was the ruler of Romanticism" (255). It was during the Romantic period that pianists came to the forefront in compositional structure. Robert Schumann (1810-1856) fit in well during this period. He believed that music should reflect a state of mind. As such, many of his compositions were like personal diaries. A number of critics have described his music as formless and strange. One critic complained that he didn't write traditional sonatas. He fervently rebuked the critic in a manner representative of the attitudes of Romanticism, "As if all mental pictures must be shaped to fit one or two forms! ... As if each idea had not its own meaning and consequently its own form" (Schonberg 169). His turgid reply was evidence that he valued the idea *preceding* the form, rather than a preconceived form being used to construct an idea. It was with such a progressive attitude that he composed Davidsbündlertänze."

In the Romantic period, freedom of artistic expression was of more importance than following traditional classical forms. Increasing numbers of unrestrained pieces were created that encouraged the communication of a single idea or a single mood. Because of Schumann's expressive creativity, it is difficult to find a precedent for his music. He was certainly influenced by Romantic literature, much of which was available at his father's bookstore, and his favorite author was Jean Paul. Jean Paul was a Romantic and Schumann loved his work, especially his colorful comments relating to music. For example, Paul eloquently wrote, "Sound shines like the dawn, and the sun rises in the form of sound; sound seeks to rise in music, and color is light." Paul also believed that it is music alone "which can open the ultimate gates to the Infinite" (Schonberg 171). It is no wonder then that Schumann was just right for the expressiveness of the

Romantic period.

Schumann had a significant career not only in music, but in music journalism as well. He created his own journal in 1834, Neue Zeitschrift für Musik (New Music Journal), and was its editor for ten years. Through it he established a forum for the creative artist, promoting the essence of Romanticism (The Billboard Encyclopedia of Classical Music 208).

Schumann's "Davidsbündlertänze," completed by September of 1837, is a piece with a series of 18 separate movements. The title is translated as "Dances of the League of David." However, they are not traditional dance pieces. Rather, they are musical dialogues between two invented characters, Eusebius and Florestan¹. "The 'Davidsbündlertänze' employs a network of subtle, witty connections" (Daviero 479). Schumann had come up with the idea of the Davidsbund, a group of invented musical progressives who, like the biblical King David, would supposedly rally against the Philistines, their uncultivated enemies (Ostwald 104). They would do so not by the sword, but through pen and publication. It was essentially a forum for him and his characters to be able to share their more advanced and cultivated views about music and other artistic matters. The group made its official debut in "Der Davidsbündler," an article published in three installments in the Der Komet journal between December 7, 1833 and January 12, 1834 (Daverio 113).

Schumann thought that music reflected life, but he also thought that it should make sense on its own terms—as an automatic musical entity" (Daviero 131). Thus, in Schumann's compositions, music and life continually engage in a process of transformation. He used biographical subjects such as Eusebius and Florestan and converted them into aesthetic subjects in the form of musical pieces or journal articles. In his mind, short forms of music were valid. He

¹ Schumann invented these two characters when he was 21. They were alter egos, in a sense, and were "both a useful artistic device and a symbol of his divided self" (The Marriage Diaries of Robert & Clara Schumann xiv-xv). Rowell pointed out that Florestan was the exuberant one, while Eusebius was melancholic (121).

loved poetry and literature, and believed that if a song could be long, like a book, it could also be short, like a poem. Thus, he developed a talent for miniature pieces depicting various moods.

Schumann used a number of repeats in “Davidsbündlertänze” in order to aid “the listener’s comprehension of the rapid affective shifts within and between the pieces” (Daviero 138). Movements II through V provide good examples of just such repeat mechanisms, and they fulfill their purpose of facilitating our listening experience by giving us something familiar (viz., a repeated phrase) to grasp on to.

Movement II of “Davidsbündlertänze,” in B minor, has the tempo marking of *Innig*, a German word indicating *sincere, cordial* and *with depth of feeling*. It seems consistent with the Romantic values of *the emotion* and *the transcendental*. It starts off slowly and the listener can easily get pulled into the hypnotic quality of the slow melodic line. This first section invokes the Romantic value of *the inner*, as it suggests contemplation. The bass line seems more active than the melodic treble line, providing a broad foundation over which the melody line gently speaks. The mood livens up a bit beginning with the 17th bar, and softens again with an ending that returns the mood of the initial 16 bars.

In G major, Movement III of “Davidsbündlertänze” displays the Romantic value of *the dynamic* with its “tendency toward restless motion” (Rowell 117). Its tempo marking is *Mit Humor*, German for *with humor*. It is loud and explosive initially, and starts with chords that seem to hop. Starting at the ninth bar, and with the tempo marking of *Schneller* (German for *faster*), the rhythmic pattern is similar to someone skipping on a sidewalk, or happily dancing to a fast waltz. The treble seems less active than the bass melody at times. The bass line sets up the treble line, almost waiting for it to catch up. It has a very festive sound, with introduction and ending parts being complimentary, except that the actual end itself resolves quietly by returning

to the tonic, a single low G note.

Movement IV of “Davidsbündlertänze,” in B minor, is a short piece of approximately 46 seconds. It begins with loud, very quickly alternating bass and treble chords. It also illustrates the Romantic value of *the dynamic*, and does so throughout its entirety. The bass seems more dominant than the treble throughout most of the song, indicating the power of *the emotion*. In this case, the emotion is effectively *eagerness*, and befits its tempo marking *Ungeduld*, German for *eager*. The ending prescriptive element of the musical notation, a fermata, allows the F-sharp chord (F#, D, F#, B) to sustain until it fades naturally.

In D major, the fifth movement of “Davidsbündlertänze” begins softly and quietly, reminiscent of the opening theme of the second movement. Its tempo marking, *Einfach*, is German for *plain* or *simple*. In that sense, it is consistent with the Romantic value of *the emotion*. But the melodic line is more active, prominent, and playful than that of the second movement. It also displays evidence of the Romantic values of *the ambiguous* and *the ambivalent* during a middle portion beginning at the nineteenth bar where single bass and mid-range notes alternate with two-note chords that seem to enter unexpectedly and form an indecisively choppy quarter-note sequence. The last sixteen bars return to the opening theme to complete the movement, and the movement ends with a two-note D chord, an A with a D above. The song illustrates broadness and variation in its dynamic range.

Many of the 18 sections of “Davidsbündlertänze” were intentionally left incomplete. This is consistent with *the disorder* value of the Romantic period. But Rowell’s concept of synoptic hearing is useful here in that it requires us to be concerned with the unity of the entire composition. “Synoptic perception groups a musical work as object, but the mode of immediate apprehension responds to music as process” (Rowell 132). So, an individual movement may

sound incomplete, as perceived by the listener, but it makes sense within the context of the entire *process* of the work. If each movement of “Davidsbündlertänze” is like a voice of either Eusebius or Florestan, it can thereby be understood as a “conversation” between the two, with each movement representing a respective mood or theme portrayed by the respective character. Movements II and V would therefore represent the melancholic voice or mood of Eusebius, and Movements III and IV would thereby represent the exuberant voice or mood of Florestan.

Being unconventional, and with 18 separate movements, “Davidsbündlertänze” may be valued unfavorably by some, much more so than with traditional compositions from the prior Classical period. But the Romantic period would *allow* that harmonic color be different and more variable than in older, more predictably structured compositions. For example, minor keys are traditionally thought to represent sadness (Rowell 156). But the fourth movement of “Davidsbündlertänze” is in B minor and gives no indication at all of sadness. Rather it is lively, and commands active attention from the listener with both its volume and its notation; it is almost frenetic in style.

Schumann was thought to be doomed by music, almost like a Greek tragedy (Schonberg 170). By being so open to new structures and ideas, he opened himself also to other tangents of thought, some of which led to a nervous breakdown in 1833. In other words, he had the mind set that could be a participant in its own downfall. It is uncertain what caused the breakdown but it was probably caused by a combination of factors, including psychological (manic depression, or schizophrenia), personal (insecurities), circumstantial (death of several relatives), and emotional (anxiety). All of these factors played a role in his mental struggle. Nevertheless, it was through Robert Schumann and his compositions, including “Davidsbündlertänze,” that the epitome of Romanticism was reflected.

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