Robert Schumann (1810–1856)

The four symphonies

Schumann as symphonist

It was a great moment for Schumann on March 21, 1839 when, having recently discovered Schubert's "Great" C major Symphony among a pile of unpublished manuscripts in Vienna, he heard Mendelssohn conduct its first performance at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Apart from an unfinished, student G minor symphony of 1832–33, he himself until then had been content to channel his main creative energy into works for the piano – not only his own instrument, but also that of his beloved Clara Wieck, already, as a teenager, acknowledged as the leading female pianist of the day. But with the sound of Schubert ringing in his ears on top of her own admonishments to spread his wings, it was not long before he confessed that he was "tingling to be at work on a symphony, too, and I believe something will come of it, once I am happily married to Clara".

No. 1 in B flat "Spring", op. 38

1. Andante un poco maestoso – Allegro molto vivace
2. Larghetto
3. Scherzo (Molto vivace)
4. Allegro animato e grazioso

A miraculous outpouring of song, in fact, both signalled and followed his eventual marriage in September, 1840, after a long and chequered courtship. But his prophecy proved correct. After dabblings with a C minor symphony, quickly put aside, 1841 found him so aflame with ideas for a "Spring" Symphony in B flat that the entire work was sketched in the four days of January 23–26. The instrumentation was completed in time for Mendelssohn to conduct the Leipzig première on March 31, though as an as yet inexperienced orchestral thinker, Schumann subsequently made considerable revisions before sending the definitive score to his publishers that August.

According to Clara, initial inspiration came from spring verse (possibly that of his acquaintance, Adolf Böttger). Schumann admitted only that his own "Liebesfrühling" had made the work what it was, and even discarded his original idea of entitling the four movements "Spring's Awakening", "Evening", "Merry Playmates", and "Spring's Farewell". Closer examination of the music in fact reveals that, whereas in younger days Schumann had almost entirely relied on extra-musical stimulus to set his creative faculties working, here he was just as stimulated by the purely musical problem of symphonic unification through thematic metamorphosis and interquotation.

The first movement's imposing slow introduction opens with a challenge from horns and trumpets once likened by Schumann to a "call to awaken". Transformed by *allegro* tempo, this call serves as main theme of the sonata-form argument, overshadowing the lyrical second subject and completely monopolising the development. The unusual inclusion of a triangle gives the texture an occasional added glint. The deeply expressive, songful *Larghetto* in E flat, cast in rondo-like form, can also claim kinship with the opening call through the three uprising notes of its leading theme, which is increasingly enriched in texture on each return. A solemn new theme at the end, mysteriously intoned by trombones, serves as link between *Larghetto* and the scherzo in D minor, where it returns, transformed, as the generating motif of the spirited third movement, whose exhilaration is even maintained throughout its two contrasting trios. The scherzo's retrospective coda leads into an introductory foreglimpse of part of the finale's tripartite second subject, which completely ousts the

gaily tripping first subject from the development section of this sonata-form farewell. It is music of radiant happiness, including subtle references to the opening "call to awaken" and also an outstandingly romantic quasi-cadenza for horns and flutes heralding the recapitulation.

No. 2 in C, op. 61

1. Sostenuto assai – Un poco più vivace – Allegro ma non troppo – Con fuoco
2. Scherzo (Allegro vivace)
3. Adagio espressivo
4. Allegro molto vivace

Totally exhausted as he was by so much concentrated effort, Schumann at once plunged into further orchestral projects, including a symphony in D minor which he withdrew after its première on December 6, 1841. It was not until November 5, 1846, that Leipzig Gewandhaus concertgoers heard what is now known as his Second Symphony, a work in C sketched in December 1845, though not completed until 17 days before the first performance, and even then extensively revised the following year. Schumann admitted to a friend that it grew from the background of a serious breakdown, and that the "capricious refractory" first movement reflected his struggle for ascendancy over illness and black despair. Again, the four movements are related by thematic cross-reference and metamorphosis.

The symphony's spirit of challenge is at once affirmed in the motto theme announced by brass at the start of the *Sostenuto assai* over a sinuous accompanying string theme. Most of the ensuing *Allegro, ma non troppo* grows from material introduced in this pregnant slow introduction, with themes refashioned and developed in a taut sonata-form argument. Though carrying a C major key signature like the first movement, the scherzo (which is unconventionally placed second) is dominated by a restlessly disturbed, chromatically inflected semiquaver theme. But tension is eased in two trios, and the movement ends with an encouraging reassertion of the opening motto. In the heart-felt *Adagio espressivo* in C minor, the yearningly nostalgic opening theme and a more assuaging second subject return, after a short, contrapuntally motivated central episode, in yet richer scoring. No music in Schumann's entire orchestral output combines deeper personal feeling with more ravishing sonority. The confident C major finale (again cast in sonata form) has a remarkable major-key transformation of the slow movement's yearning opening theme as its own second subject. Significantly, Schumann also introduces a new theme midway through (in essence the same quotation from Beethoven's "An die ferne Geliebte" through which he had saluted Clara in his C major Fantasy for piano) as pointer to the source of his Beethoven-like victory over fate, which the symphony's final bars, in a recall of the opening motto, so triumphantly proclaim.

No. 3 in E flat "Rhenish", op. 97

1. Lebhaft
2. Scherzo (Sehr mäßig)
3. Nicht schnell
4. Feierlich
5. Lebhaft

At the beginning of September, 1850, Schumann, moved to Düsseldorf as City Music Director. He was delighted at the satisfaction his first public appointment gave Clara, and touched enough by the warmth of their welcome to turn his back on nagging memories of recent illness. Stimulated by fresh Rhenish air, and still more by the challenge of an orchestra of his own, he soon began to compose again with the spontaneity and eagerness of his youth. A cello concerto was completed that October in a mere two weeks. And by December 9 he had finished the "Rhenish" Symphony in E flat, whose première he himself conducted, from the manuscript, on February 6, 1851.

The opening *Lebhaft*, in which he dispenses with slow introduction to plunge headlong into an invigorating, initially artfully syncopated first subject, at once conveys his exhilaration of spirit while at the same time revealing a mind at the peak of its powers. None of his sonata-form symphonic arguments is more direct, more concentrated, more continuous in its organic growth. Originally entitled "Morning on the Rhine", the scherzo contrasts a robust, swinging Ländler-like main section in C with a more nostalgically lyrical, "once-upon-a-time" trio in A minor. The first of the two slow movements is an unassuming, ternary-shaped quasi "Song without Words" in A flat. But the ensuing *Feierlich* in E flat minor is unique among Schumann's slow movements in its eschewal of subjective lyricism in favour of an austerely impersonal, contrapuntal cast of thought. "In the style of an accompaniment to a solemn ceremony" was Schumann's own subsequently suppressed descriptive title. Significantly, he and Clara had spent Saturday, September 29, 1850, sightseeing in Cologne, where they were deeply impressed by the cathedral in a state of readiness for the enthronement of Archbishop von Geissel as Cardinal the following day. Moving on to the E flat major finale has been likened to "stepping from the sombre atmosphere of a medieval cathedral into the sunshine and bustle of life outside". The sonata-form argument culminates in a grand coda including references to first-movement and "cathedral" material as well as to its own virile themes.

No. 4 in D minor Op. 120

1. Ziemlich langsam – Lebhaft –
2. Romanze (Ziemlich langsam) –
3. Scherzo (Lebhaft) –
4. Langsam – Lebhaft – Schneller – Presto

Having withdrawn his D minor Symphony after its unsuccessful première in December, 1841, Schumann waited 10 years before embarking on revisions of scoring and texture that resulted in its re-emergence at a Düsseldorf concert on March 3, 1853, as his Symphony No. 4 in D minor. This time he was pleased enough to conduct a repeat performance at the opening concert of the city's Whitsuntide Festival on May 15, prompting the entry "Grosser Enthusiasmus" in his *Haushaltbuch*.

Today, it can be recognised as his outstanding contribution to the development of the symphony as a genre through its use of cyclical form. Succeeding each other without sharp break, all four movements are largely derived from two ideas introduced in the searching, opening *Ziemlich langsam*, first a stealthy quaver theme for strings and bassoons. But it is the arpeggio-motivated semiquaver fragment played by violins towards the end that, in a concentrated *stringendo*, leads direct into *Lebhaft*, where it serves both as agitated first subject in D minor and gentler second subject in F major besides haunting the new themes briefly introduced for contrast in the central development section. Dispensing with formal recapitulation, the movement ends with a confident D major coda.

Though the ternary shaped A minor *Romanze* starts with a new theme like the song of a love-lorn minstrel over a plucked string accompaniment (Schumann's original intention was to score this for guitar), it is not long before the stealthy quavers of the introduction return for one of Schumann's happiest thematic metamorphoses as a solo violin delicately embroiders their recall in the major key of D. The turbulent D minor scherzo grows from an inversion of the same stealthy quavers, while for the melody of its gracious trio in B flat Schumann merely waves a wand over the solo violin's triplet decoration from the middle of the *Romanze*. Nowhere is the initial arpeggio-motivated semiquaver fragment more awe-inspiring than when serving as link to the finale, where it punctuates the vigorous first subject (lifted from the first movement's development). But exhilarating new themes contribute just as much to this movement's triumphant affirmation of light and hope culminating in a stirring *schneller* homecoming.