

# Exploration of Robert Schumann's composition "Symphonic Etudes" History of creation, destiny of a genius and his masterpiece in the music world

Click on the image or link to the performance:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp3txcPLReE&t=441s>



It's recommended to listen to the performance while reading this research. Time codes will enhance readers' orientation and understanding of the performance.

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## **Introduction**

In 1834 Schumann began to compose what would eventually become known as the "*Symphonic Etudes*" opus 13. While almost entirely neglected during his lifetime, it has since taken its place among the greatest works in the piano repertoire. Composed in several distinct stages and published in two versions within Schumann's lifetime, the work's life has only grown more complex since Schumann's death. In 1861 a third version was published in an attempt to reconcile the first two editions. Additionally, in 1873 Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann (Robert's wife) published five variations originally deleted by Schumann as a supplement to the *Symphonic Etudes*, which will be known as the posthumous variations. In addition to its many technical and interpretive demands, the performer of the *Symphonic Etudes* is faced with not only choosing which version of the piece to play the first and second editions feature a number of significant changes but also with deciding if and how to include the posthumous variations. Since the early twentieth century, it has become common to include some or all of these posthumous variations within concert performances and recordings of the work. How this is done varies with each performer, but by varying the placement of these variations, the performer has the opportunity to fundamentally alter the work's presentation and structure. As a result, the *Symphonic Etudes* has continued to evolve into the present day and will continue to do so, as performers constantly experiment with different arrangements for the inclusion of the posthumous variations within the work.

## **Creation history**

The *Symphonic Etudes* Op. 13, is a set of etudes for solo piano by Robert Schumann. It began in 1834 as a theme and sixteen variations on a theme by Báron von Fricken that Baron composed himself, plus a further variation on an entirely different theme from Heinrich Marschner's opera. The work was first published in 1837 as *XII Études Symphoniques*.

Other titles had been considered in September 1834: "*Variations pathétiques and Etuden im Orchestercharakter von Florestan und Eusebius*". Schumann had a bipolar mental disorder and in this case, the *Études* would have been signed by two imaginary figures in whom Schumann saw two essential, opposite and complementary aspects of his own personality and his own poetic world. Schumann made several versions of the work, therefore in the 1835 version the pieces divided so as to emphasise the lyrical, mélancholy and introvert pages

(Eusebius) with those of a more excitable and dynamic nature (Florestan). However, Florestan prevails in the 1837 version.

In 1852 was a second major edition where all additional variations were excluded, as well as virtuoso etudes no. 3 (05:56, link provided at the beginning) and 9 (14:13).

On republishing the set in 1890, Johannes Brahms restored the five variations that had been cut by Schumann. These are now often played, but in positions within the cycle that vary with each performance; there are now twelve variations and these five so-called "posthumous" variations which exist as a supplement.

### **Inspirations of Schumann**

In 1836 Schumann made a survey of the etude as a genre from the time of Bach to his own day. It is an extensive list including major figures of this genre such as Clementi, Cramer, and Chopin as well as many other composers now long forgotten. Demonstrating Schumann's extensive knowledge of the genre the list is organised by twenty-nine distinct technical aims, with an asterisk marking etudes "especially distinguished by a poetical character."

All of Schumann's proposed titles show some of the essential characters of Op. 13's conception. This was of 'studies' in the sense that the term assumed in Frederick Chopin's Op.10. So to say, concert pieces in which the investigation of possibilities of technique and timbres in writing for the piano is carried out; they are 'symphonic études' through the wealth and complexity of the colours evoked – the keyboard becomes an "orchestra" capable of blending and contrasting different timbres.

The *Études Symphoniques* learn the lesson of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations: the theme that acts as a unifying element is amplified and transformed. It becomes the basis from which blossoms inventions of the expressive character. Schumann also took inspiration from the Goldberg Variations, most obviously in the use of various canonic effects (Var 4, 07:21).

The highly virtuosic (Var 6, 09:21) demands of the piano writing are frequently aimed not for the bravura effect but at clarification of the polyphonic complexity and at delving more deeply into keyboard experimentation. The Etudes are considered to be one of the most difficult works for piano by Schumann and in piano literature as a whole.

## Symphonic Etudes during Schumann's lifetime

As with many of his piano works, the Symphonic Etudes were played very infrequently during Schumann's lifetime. The first public performance of the composition likely took place on August 13, 1837, when Clara included three of the Etudes in a Leipzig performance, with Schumann himself in the audience.

When Clara performed the whole set for the first time, Schumann wrote fondly of her performance:

“The way you played my Etudes I won't ever forget that; they were absolute masterpieces the way you presented them the public can't appreciate such playing but one person was sitting there, no matter how much his heart was pounding with other feelings, my entire being at that instant bowed down before you as an artist.”

Already in 1838, he writes to Clara: “You have done well not to play my etudes. They are not suitable for the public, and it would be silly if I should complain of their not understanding what was not intended for their approval, but exists solely for its own sake”.

Clara regularly attempted to persuade Schumann to write something that the public would understand. In a letter she wrote:

“Listen, Robert, won't you for once compose something brilliant, easily understandable, and something without titles, something that is a complete, coherent piece, not too long and not too short? I would so love to have something of yours to play in concerts, something written for an audience.”

Only in the second half of the nineteenth century Schumann's piano music would make its way into the standard repertoire as changes in taste resulted in a more serious kind of concert for which Schumann's music was better suited.

The Symphonic Etudes would be performed again by Clara in Holland in 1853, after which on recitals in Vienna (1856) and Frankfurt (1880). Tausig played it in Berlin in 1865, and it appeared regularly on programs by Anton Rubinstein beginning as early as 1869 in Basel. Rubinstein included it on his historic 1873 seven recital series in New York, where his fourth program was dedicated entirely to the music of Schumann. This was perhaps the first performance of the Symphonic Etudes given in the United States.

Indeed, Schumann's early piano works, for the most part, did not fare well with the public during his lifetime. Contemporaries' critical reactions to Schumann's music during his lifetime weren't pleasant. One of the reviews (dated 1844) of Schumann's music, states: “The music strove too much for strange, puzzling effects. The music is often so difficult to play that only Liszt and Thalberg in the world can produce even an acceptable performance.”

In an 1845 Franz Brendel suggests five reasons that Schumann's music failed to find a broad audience:

- 1) lack of press
- 2) its technical difficulty
- 3) its elusive nature
- 4) its modern, youthful tone, which could be off-putting to older players
- 5) its harmonic harshness, which could discourage some people.

Researcher Newcomb summarises critical opinions of the time toward Schumann's music: "As private music, for meditation and enjoyment at home, it was technically too difficult to play and listen. Even the well-disposed piano virtuoso Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann had to admit that they found little or no success playing Schumann's music in public concerts in the period from 1835 to 1855."

### **Changes of Schumann's conceptions**

Schumann's editing might well be seen in the light of both his reaction to the market and the changing cultural aesthetic of the time. Less complicated music seems to have been more marketable and perhaps even more culturally relevant. In any case, the changes Schumann made for the 1852 edition of the Symphonic Etudes suggest a concern for a more straightforward form.

There were at least 4 known today sketches of Symphonic Etudes composed at different times. Moreover, it had officially 8 different names (but very likely there were more). Researcher Madson lists the following in probable chronological order:

*Tema quasi Marcia funèbre (Berlin Sketch, 1834)*

*Pathetic Variations (letter to Baron von Fricken and original title on Mariemont manuscript)*

*Fantaisies et Finale sur un thème de M. le Baron de Fricken, composées p. l. Pfte et dédiées à Madame la Baronne de Fricken, née Comtesse de Zedtwitz. par R. Schumann. Oeuvre 9 (Mariemont manuscript, January 18, 1835)*

*Zwölf Davidsbündler Etuden (NZfM, April 8, 1836)*

*X Etuden im Orchester Character, von Florestan und Eusebius (NZfM, May 6, 1836)*

*Etudes Op. 13 (NZfM, June 24, 1836)*

*XII Etudes Symphoniques (first edition, 1837)*

*Etudes en forme de Variations (second edition, 1852)*

These different titles suggest that Schumann's conception of the work changed over time as it evolved towards the published editions, and this can probably

help explain why he made such drastic revisions over the course of the life in this composition.

The compositional evolution of the Symphonic Etudes was a process marked by revision and exploration. While the first version of the composition, *Fantaisies et Finale*, had been completed by 18th of January, 1835, Schumann would continue to explore different arrangements of the individual pieces. By the time the Symphonic Etudes was first published in 1837, Schumann had deleted nearly half of the original composition, creating new music to take its place. Exactly why Schumann so dramatically altered his composition will likely remain a mystery. However, it is interesting to view these changes in light of some of the important events in Schumann's life that took place during these several years.

## **Conclusion**

The overall conception of the Symphonic Etudes is quite unique in the piano repertoire. In its earliest versions, the Symphonic Etudes contained elements of the etude, variation, fantasy, dance, and character piece. As it evolved toward its published form, Schumann seems to have given primacy to the etude and variation genres. This is particularly evident in the final title chosen by Schumann for the second edition of the work: "Etudes in the form of Variations."

Today this masterpiece is seen as an essential work in a standard repertoire of a concert pianist. It allows the performer to demonstrate the utmost of his artistic abilities and invites the audience to experience this astonishing journey full of tragedy, triumph, sorrow and delight.

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### **Bibliography**

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