

MAY BYRON

A DAY WITH
ROBERT
SCHUMANN

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Содержание

A DAY WITH SCHUMANN	4
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

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A DAY WITH SCHUMANN

It is an April morning in 1844, in the town of Leipzig, – calm, cool, and fraught with exquisite promise of a prolific spring, – when the Herr Professor Doctor Robert Schumann, rising before six o'clock as is his wont, very quietly and noiselessly in his soft felt slippers, dresses and goes downstairs. For he does not wish to disturb or incommode his sleeping wife, whose dark eyes are still closed, or to awaken any of his three little children.

The tall, dignified, well-built man, with his pleasant, kindly expression, and his air of mingled intellect and reverie, bears his whole character written large upon him, – his transparent honesty, unflagging industry, and generous, enthusiastic altruism. No touch of self-seeking about him, no hint of ostentation or conceit: he is still that same reticent and silent person, of whom it was said some years ago by his friends,

"Herr Schumann is a right good man,
He smokes tobacco as no one can:
A man of thirty, I suppose,
And short his hair, and short his nose."

That, indeed, is the sum total of his outward appearance: as for the inward man, it is not to be known save through his writings. Literature and music are the only means of expression, of communication with others, which are possessed by this modest, pensive, reserved maestro, upon whom the sounding titles of Doctor and Professor sit so strangely.

In the unparalleled fervour and romance of his compositions, – in the passionate heart-opening of his letters, – in the sane, wholesome, racy colloquialism of his critiques, – the real Robert Schumann is unfolded. Otherwise he might remain a perennial enigma to his nearest and dearest: for even in his own family circle, tenderly and dearly as he adores his wife and children, his lips remain sealed of all that they might say: and the fixed, unvarying quietude of his face but rarely reveals the least suggestion of his deeper feelings.

Yet, at the present time, were you to search the world around, you should hardly find a happier man than this, in his own serene and thoughtful way. For, in his own words, "I have an incomparable wife. There is no happiness equal to that. If you could only take a peep at us in our snug little artist home!" Clara Wieck, whom he has known from her childhood, whom he struggled, and agonised, and fought for against fate, for five long years of frustration and disappointment, is not only his beloved wife and the mother of his little ones, – she is his fellow-worker and co-artist, and literal helpmate in every department

of life. She has "filled his life with sunshine of love," – and, "as a woman," he declares, "she is a gift from heaven... Think of perfection, and I will agree to it!" But, beyond that, she has poured her beautiful soul into every hungry cranny of his artistic sense. "For Clara's untiring zeal and energy in her art, she really deserves love and encouragement... I will say no more of my happiness in possessing a girl with whom I have grown to be one through art, intellectual affinities, the regular intercourse of years, and the deepest and holiest affection. My whole life is one joyous activity."

The annals of art, indeed, hold no more lovely record of a union between natural affinities. That of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning perhaps approximates most closely to that of Robert and Clara Schumann. But whereas in the former case both husband and wife were alike engaged upon the same branch of literature, – poetry, – and a certain sense of sadness was apt to embitter the success of the wife, because of the unpopularity (in those days) of the husband, – Schumann is solely and pre-eminently a composer, and Clara solely and absorbingly a pianist. No shadow of artistic rivalry can fall upon their delight, nor darken their pleasure in each other's achievements. Schumann's most impassioned and characteristic productions have been definitely inspired by Clara, ever since the days when, as a child of nine, she listened to his fantastic fairy-tales, and her exquisite playing thrilled him with a desire to think in music. And Clara, who has never made a mere show of her marvellous

executive skill, but has "consecrated it to the service of true art alone," – is never happier than when interpreting her husband's works.

It is, in short, necessary to deal with Schumann as a whole, – as a man who has fulfilled the triple destiny for which Nature intended him, – as individual, husband, and father, – before one can even approximately understand this silent, studious dreamer, whose one ideal of happiness is to sit at home and compose.

Schumann considers this early morning hour the most precious of his day, from a working standpoint. He seats himself at his desk, and places his two treasures where they shall catch his eye conspicuously; for he regards them more or less as charms and talismans to bring out the best that is in him. They are, a steel pen which he found lying on Beethoven's grave at Vienna, and the MS. score of Schubert's C-major Symphony, which he obtained by a lucky chance. He regards these with a mixture of sentiment and humorous toleration of his own mysticism: but he cherishes them none the less, and often casts a reassuring glance in their direction, as he covers sheet after sheet of paper with his shockingly illegible handwriting. "Poets and pianists," says he with resignation, "almost always write with a dog's paw. The printers will make it out somehow." He is engaged upon his work in connection with the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Musical Times), which he originally founded, and of which he has been some nine years Editor. During all these years he has contributed to its pages those admirable reviews and appreciations which

are so utterly unlike anything heretofore attempted in the realm of musical criticism. "There is no quality to be desired in a musical critic that Schumann does not possess: " and in addition to technical equipments of every kind, keen insight and an almost prophetic quality in his predictions, he has the priceless gift too often denied to the critic, – that of superabundant sympathy. His hands are ever thrown out to welcome the young and timid genius, even as they are clenched, so to speak, with threatening fists towards Philistinism, charlatanism and mediocrity. He loves to praise rather than to blame, and to detect the germs of coming greatness in some obscure, unsuspected artist. He takes into his regard the personal equation wherever possible, and does not separate the musician from the man: for, he says, "the man and the musician in myself have always struggled to manifest themselves simultaneously... I speak with a certain diffidence of works, of the precursors of which I know nothing. I like to know something of the composer's school, his youthful aspirations, his exemplars and even of the actions and circumstances of his life, and what he has done hitherto."

As his pen travels rapidly over the pages, the reason of his cramped and crabbed handwriting is only too evident. Schumann's right hand is crippled. In an evil hour of his youth, while yet he was consumed with the ambition of a would-be virtuoso, he experimented, with artificial restrictions, upon one of his right-hand fingers, intending thus to strengthen the rest by assiduous practice ... with the result that he lamed his hand

for ever. This disastrous attempt deprived the world of a good pianist, but conferred upon it a great composer: for it is possible that the executive would have superseded the creative ability within him. Nevertheless, he confesses that, "My lame hand makes me wretched sometimes . . . it would mean so much if I were able to play. What a relief to give utterance to all the music surging within me! As it is, I can barely play at all, but stumble along with my fingers all mixed up together in a terrible way. It causes me great distress."

Thus, you perceive, he is considerably debarred from expressing himself in sounds, no less than in words: he must perforce retire more and more within himself. The ease with which he writes is balanced by the difficulty with which he speaks: and bitterly he has complained, "People are often at a loss to understand me, and no wonder! I meet affectionate advances with icy reserve, and often wound and repel those who wish to help me... It is not that I fail to appreciate the very smallest attention, or to distinguish every subtle change in expression and attitude: it is a fatal something in my words and manner which belies me."

He is, indeed, only paralleled by the *Lotus Flower* of his own delicious song, – shrinking from the daylight of publicity, and softly unfolding to the gentle rays of love.

The Lotus flower is pining
Under the sun's red light:

Slowly her head inclining,
She dreams and waits for the night.

The moon, who is her lover,
Awakes her with his rays,
And bids her softly uncover
Her veiled and gentle gaze.

Now glowing, gleaming, throbbing,
She looks all mutely above, —

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