

## Robert Schumann--Kreiseriana, Op. 16

Schumann's *Kreiseriana* is one of his greatest large-scale cycles for piano. The work is dedicated to Chopin, but remains remarkably individual in its expressive language.

Robert Schumann came from a family of literature, and much of his music reflects this. *Kreiseriana* is directly inspired by a volume of the same name written by E.T.A. Hoffman. The fascinating thing about this volume (some of which I have had the opportunity to read) is perhaps found not so much in its content as in its "form." The volume consists of the fictional "writings" (in the form of journals, notes, and scribbling of random thoughts) penned by the fictional character Kreiser, who was a "Kapellmeister" (music/choir director) for an unnamed German town. The brilliantly gifted, if quite eccentric, Kreiser is constantly composing, writing, working with other musicians—sometimes musicians with absolutely *no* talent—and documenting his thoughts in this volume. This in itself is not so strange, but, Hoffman has taken these writings and superimposed them with the thoughts of none other than the *household cat*! Which makes for an extremely imaginative, if a little crazy, book.

For those familiar with Schumann's music, Hoffman's book would seem a perfect inspiration. Schumann is famous for his alleged mental instability. Throughout his life he adopted two personas in his music and writing—one (Florestan) was fiery, passionate, excitable and impulsive, while the other (Eusebius) was much more introverted, poetic, and deliberate. Schumann was so deeply involved with these created personalities that, as a critic of others' music, he would sometimes write reviews, signing "Florestan," or "Eusebius." Sometimes, he wrote two reviews of the same concert—one by Florestan, one by Eusebius! Scholars have pointed to this as a sign of his questionable mental health, culminating in his own suicide in 1856.

### I. Äußerst bewegt (Extremely animated)

While there is no specific story or program for *Kreiseriana*, the music is highly suggestive, and it is not hard to imagine what it might represent. The first movement is perhaps the most "tormented"—a whirling torrent of notes and anguished left hand accents are full of anger and raw energy. This movement is, at times, quite nightmarish. Its form is ABA, with a contrasting, lyrical middle section.

### II. Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch (Very inwardly and not too quickly)

Containing some of the most beautiful music Schumann wrote, the 2nd movement is the longest in *Kreiseriana*. The form is ABACA—the "A" section brimming with earnest lyricism and heartfelt confiding; the "B" section a jolting, Baroque-like dance which lasts no longer than 20 seconds or so; the "C" section a stirring, troubled dialogue (argument?) between hands through which I feel the entire character of the movement changes. Something is learned in the "C" section which cannot allow the musician to return to the "A" section with the same heartfelt innocence as when it was first played.

### III. Sehr aufgeregt (Very agitated)

If we are to take explicit cues from Kreiser's household cat, this may well be one of her movements. The "nervous, agitated" figures seem almost, in some way, "cat-like"—something similar will be heard again,

in the 5th movement. The form is ABA, with an absolutely gorgeous middle section—Schumann’s blossoming lyricism seems never more than a few measures away. The “B” section is quintessentially Romantic, brimming with pulsing, constantly checked emotion. After the nerves of the “A” section return, a blistering coda which expands the cat-like gestures scrambles up and down the keyboard in syncopations until driving to an offset end.

#### IV. Sehr langsam (Very slowly)

One of the most beautiful and famous movements in Schumann’s piano music, the 4th movement of *Kreisleriana* has inspired all kinds of interesting interpretations and readings. Again in ABA form, the music is pregnant with meaning. Highly poetic, it is akin to “The Poet Speaks” from *Kinderszenen*, or the last movement of the *Fantasie*. Many have suggested there is a deeply felt, but inexpressible love in this movement. Perhaps the music was written with Clara Wieck in mind, whom Schumann would later marry?

#### V. Sehr lebhaft (Very lively)

The 5th movement of *Kreisleriana* is, in my mind, perhaps the most imaginative of the set. It is in a kind of ABACABA form, with Schumann’s characteristically wild mood swings in full view. The opening section tip-toes mischievously around the keyboard, new voices entering right and left in “Baroque” fashion. The sneaky figures are suddenly swept away by a confident new theme, which, after four repetitions, is supplanted again by the opening music. A particularly exciting moment happens in the “C” section, when the music suddenly takes off, starting in the bass and gradually climbing both in register and sound, until it reaches—quite unexpectedly—a diminished harmony, which drains all the energy from the sudden surge.

#### VI. Sehr langsam (Very slowly)

Many musical works in Western Art music have, inevitably, a *heart*. *Kreisleriana*, as a musical organism, must have *two* hearts—the first heart being the 4th movement and the second heart being the 6th. While the whole matter of musical meaning and interpretation is highly subjective, I feel this movement to be deeply emotional, even heartbreaking in its content. Marked “very slowly,” this music could easily be called “longing,” and “nostalgic.” A plaintive and incredibly simple melody opens the movement, answered by a warm bass melody—Schumann’s writing is luminous and vocal. An upsetting interruption of almost static chords with abrupt runs stumbles back into the melody of the opening, but this time it is stated deep in the bass of the piano. The music seems to be going somewhere, gradually growing richer in texture and harmony, only to arrive back at the “very slow” voice of the beginning once again. This time the treble statement is quietly carried into a different place by new music, which, as it develops, is reminiscent of dancing. Read into it what you will, but I find this penultimate “dance” to be what is heartbreaking about the movement. Perhaps something is remembered (a dance) which will not take place again?

#### VII. Sehr rasch (Very fast)

A stormy scramble of virtuosity and decidedly “Baroque” (if through a Romantic lens), the 7th movement is cast in a highly interesting ABA form. With almost nonstop 16th-notes throughout, Schumann makes use of circle-of-fifths and even a “fugue” in the “B” section which builds up to a climactic plummeting down the keyboard. At this point Schumann indicates the music must be played *Noch Schneller* (even faster)—in effect, a challenge to play as fast as you possibly can. In one of Schumann’s characteristic moments, this whirling, wild “even faster” section comes to a dead stop, interrupted by hymn-like chords. At the arrival of the chordal section it seems as if we have had a page of the book torn out and arrived in a completely different place altogether.

#### VIII. Schnell und spielend (Fast and playful)

The final movement is, in a word, enigmatic. A friend of mine who performed *Kreisleriana* remarked that “it’s not an ending!” Indeed, this enormous cycle does seem to go out with almost a “whimper,” not the grand bombast or deep poetry we might expect. In my mind, this is the most disturbing, most psychologically shattered movement of the work. At times emotionally lucid, and at times creepily abstract, this movement *does* seem about endings, but not happy ones. Cast in ABACA form, the “A” section begins with stark and strangely *playful* right-hand skips up and down the keyboard, accompanied by a slightly scary left hand who never seems to know exactly where the beats are, and without any larger reason, accents certain notes unpredictably. This gives way to a lyrical, sympathetic “B” section, which never manages to free itself from the “playful” rhythms of the “A” section, and, just as it seems it is gaining some momentum, runs headlong into a return of the “A” section. Schumann states this eerie music once again, and at its closure the most thunderous moment of the entire cycle begins—the “C” section. Here Schumann has given the indication “with all your power,”—the music rises up with a tremendous, resounding heroicism, and finally, perhaps for the first time in the whole cycle, it seems that there will be some incredible climactic moment which brings closure to so many moments of regret, lost love or grief. Instead, the demented frolic of the “A” section, completely against hope and expectation of relief, dances off through the foreground as a strange apparition of inevitability and death. Thus ends *Kreisleriana*.