



R. Schumann: Six Pieces in Canonic Form op. 56 (arranged by Theodor Kirchner)

We have various and associative circumstances – that Robert and Clara Schumann had purchased a pedal piano for study purposes, for example – to thank for Robert Schumann's op. 56, a work that has greatly enriched the piano trio literature. The pedal piano was an instrument made from two pianos, one built on top of the other and played with foot pedals. Learning to play the pedal piano requires organ-playing skills; for the Schumanns, the main reason for acquiring the instrument was so that they would be able to practice playing the organ at home. The purchase occurred in 1845, the year of Robert's "Fugenpassion" phase, during which he worked on the fugue and canon more feverishly than before. Since the organ was the predestined instrument for these forms, the pedal piano at home served as a welcome tool. "Robert quickly showed interest for this instrument and composed various sketches and studies for the pedal piano," said Clara. "They will certainly gain appeal for being something revolutionary."

These works include the Six Pieces in Canonic Form op. 56, which Schumann used to explore the possibilities of the newly discovered instrument. It is striking how Schumann, despite the strict form of the canon, is able to draw out a variety of styles from the music and master the techniques of counterpoint; in short, to create wonderful miniatures with these six pieces. Clara was very enthusiastic about them, as was Mendelssohn, who – as those who know his music well will understand – found a special connection to the fifth piece.

Contrary to Schumann's expectations and hopes, the pedal piano never found its place in concert halls and in the home; it had been largely forgotten already in the second half of the 19th century. This is the reason why many renowned composers, such as Bizet and Debussy, have arranged the Canonic Pieces for different instrumentations: they wanted to

prevent this gem of Schumann's music from – as in the case of the pedal piano – falling into obscurity. The most interesting arrangement of this work was made for piano trio by Theodor Kirchner, who also arranged a version for piano four hands.

On the whole, the piano trio version remains faithful to the counterpoint and expressivity of the original piece. Through Kirchner's instrumentation, the genius of this work truly comes into its own – perhaps even more so than in the original! Who could have been closer to Schumann and his music than Theodor Kirchner, 13 years Schumann's junior, who was also a student and friend of Schumann's and who belonged to Schumann's Davidsbündler cycle? Of no lesser significance is their mutual friend Johannes Brahms, and both Kirchner and Brahms' veneration for Clara Schumann. After Schumann's death in the 1860s, Kirchner even had an affair with Clara. Two decades thereafter, thirty years after Robert's death and more than forty years after the composition of the Canonic Pieces, Kirchner decided to take on the opus of his esteemed and beloved teacher – and promptly made two arrangements of it. What were the sentiments that could have moved Kirchner, who was by then no longer such a youthful man, to revisit this work?