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Aspects of Robert Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes*. Semantic Character and Some Performance-Related Implications

Keywords: expressive markings, piano performance, contents description, Dinu Ciocan, 5-valued logic

In this study I intend to highlight some significant aspects of the semantic character of the *Symphonic Etudes*: to describe contents and form, to offer performance-related considerations; to comment Schumann's text, on the one hand, and to employ some more recent or older theories elaborated by Dinu Ciocan (for example, relating music to the spiritual paradigm:¹ sacred / profane / demonic), on the other hand. I based my analysis on my extensive experience as a performer of this work. The study is structured into three chapters: a description of each variation in chronological order, a table containing the variations as evaluated through the lens of the 5-valued logic (Ciocan 2000: 77), and a comparison between two landmark renditions, Sviatoslav Richter's and Wilhelm Kempff's.

THE SEMANTIC CHARACTER OF THE *SYMPHONIC ETUDES*: CONSIDERATIONS

The fact that Robert Schumann initially called the work *Variations pathétiques* (Appel 2010: 169) significantly points to its semantic character (the adjective

¹ "3.1. Sacred music is that whose dominant character fits the state of prayer. 3.2. Demonic music is that whose dominant character is opposed to the state of prayer. 3.3. Profane music open to the sacred or the demonic is that whose character is compatible with the state of prayer, liberating the soul and body, or compatible with the demonic state, enslaving the soul and body" (Ciocan 2012: 48-49 and *Doctoral conference*, April 9, 2019, UNMB).

could not for example have been associated to the *Abegg Variations*, rather lyrical in character).

The theme

“Melancholic”, “grave” (Leahu 1976: 144), it resembles a funeral march as per its minor key (C# minor) and its relatively slow and constant quarter-note motion, at times interrupted by dotted rhythms or eighth-note motions. There is in this theme a trace of the funereal (especially in the trill in bar 11), and in a letter from November 28, 1834 the composer himself says so:

I tarry on the finale of my variations. I would gladly grow the funeral march into a triumphal march, and add some dramatic interest too, but I can't escape the minor key, and 'intention' can often fail, can become too concrete. Should the inspiration visit me, I will fully abandon myself, child-like, to it.² (Appel 2010: 131)

In bars 9 and 10 the motifs intoned by the soprano voice (the main voice) consist almost exclusively of eighth notes which, I find, makes it, compared to the previous phrases, more subjective, *lamento*-like. To such character contributes the descending harmonic C# minor scale (an important detail, as the augmented second between degrees VI and VII is essential in creating the particular atmosphere) across a descending ninth (D#-C#) after a short ascent of a fifth on the notes of the dominant chord (G#-B#-D#) of C# minor.

As regards motivic structure, the eighth notes in bars 9 and 10 are quite interesting, because they can be interpreted as pickup motifs (or cells) of three plus one until the beginning of bar 10, when, because the first three eighth notes (F#, E, D#) will sequence the preceding pickup (A, G#, F#), they acquire a downbeat character. The subsequent 2-note cell (E/C#), with the same range, of a minor third, as well as the preceding two 3-eighth notes groups, corroborated with the 3-eighth note motif turned downbeat constitute a diminution of the meter (the meter results from the relations between motifs' melodic peaks). Günther Spies mentions the character difference between phrase 3

² “Mit meinen Variationen steh' ich noch am Finale. Ich möchte gern den Trauermarsch nach und nach zu einem recht stolzen Siegeszug steigern u. überdies einiges dramatisches Interesse hineinbringen, komme aber nicht aus dem Moll, u. mit der «Absicht» beim Schaffen trifft man oft fehl und wird zu materiell. Erfasst mich aber mal der günstige Augenblick, so will ich mich wie ein Kind ihm hingeben.”

and the other phrases of the theme: "The flowing, calm unfolding of phrase 3 drafts an opposing expressive force"³ (Spies 1997: 31).

The theme concludes with a half cadence on the dominant chord, a means to render the music poetic. Such an end as an expected C#-G#-C# (tonic – dominant – tonic) on the soprano, answering to the D#-A#-D# motif from bar 4, would have produced a much more common conclusion.

To compare (in parallel) the evolution of the semantic tension of two of the basic elements of music, melody and harmony, here is the melody of the upper voice of the right hand and the fundamentals of the harmonic functions of the left hand, placed according to the circle of fifths, so as to perceive visually (like in a melodic drawing) the evolution of the harmonic tension (see Ex. 1).

Ex. 1. Robert Schumann, *Symphonic Etudes*, Theme, bars 1-16, Evolution of the harmonic tension.

As we can see, the maximum and the minimum points (Ciocan and Rădulescu 1989) of the melody are generally distinct from those of the harmony. If we look at phrase 1 (first four bars), we notice that the melodic maximum⁴ A

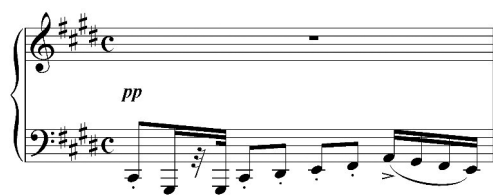
³ "Im fließend-ruhigen Melodieverlauf des 3. Teilabschnitts zeichnet sich eine ausdrucksstarke Gegenkraft ab."

⁴ According to Dinu Ciocan's theory, every musical work is in permanent motion either towards a maximum or a minimum point of semantic tension. The maximum points are the tensest and the minimum points, the most relaxed of that work. Usually, the maximum and minimum points of the various elements of a particular score

(bar 2) coincides, at first, with a harmonic minimum (F \sharp), and the melodic *minimum minimorum* (A \sharp , bar 4) coincides with the harmonic *maximum maximorum* (D \sharp). In such cases (where the maximum points of the different elements don't coincide) a good performer will usually find the resultant of these diverging forces, highlighting it by means of adequate dynamics and tempo.

Etude I

The composer indicated a tempo change for this variation, but *Un poco piu vivo* also points to a change in the expressive character. This is evident even without the composer's marking, as the durations are shorter (eighth notes, mostly, but sixteenth notes too, and even, in the dotted rhythms, thirty-second notes) and the main motif, unlike the *legato* theme, is largely in *staccato*. The *pyrrhic* (Mattheson 1739/1995: 164) meter, consisting of two short notes and described by Johann Mattheson as martial and fiery, appears four times in the main motif (four eighth notes followed by four sixteenth notes), from which the military march character of this etude derives (see Ex. 2).



Ex. 2. Robert Schumann, Symphonic Etudes, *Etude I*, bar 1.

It's also possible that this is a *proceleusmatic* meter, consisting of four short notes and expressing "a commanding shout to invigorate sailors".⁵ In bar 10 the main character changes, turning more lyrical due to both the modulation to the relatively distant key of G major and to the appearance of the anapest meter. The presence of the latter in the theme, bars 10 and 11, is very likely no accident, as it even evokes the two descending seconds motif sequenced and imitated by the voices in Etude I.

(melody, rhythm, harmony, meter) don't coincide, the performers having to discern for themselves a resultant of all these forces.

⁵ "Proceleusmaticus . . . bedeutet ein befehlendes, aufmunterndes Geschrey der Schiffeleute an" (Mattheson 1739/1995: 170).

The tempo change is indicated by the Schumann's metronome marking (quarter note = 52 in the theme, quarter note = 72 in Variation 1). If the performer would rather use faster tempos, they risk twisting the composer's original character intention. The temptation to play this variation faster and with a shorter *staccato* and to render it therefore mysterious or even grotesque is real.

The dynamic tension augments (as per Schumann's markings) in three phases and then diminishes by one degree in the reprise (bar 1 *pp*, bar 5 *p*, bar 9 *mf*, bar 13 *p*).

An interesting event takes places in this variation: a motif can have, in different contexts, different syntactic functions. This happens in bars 4 and 9. In bar 4, the motif ends a phrase, while in bar 9 the same motif (or rather a very similar one, because the filling in the inner voices is somewhat different) begins a new phrase. Monotony will not set in with this repetition, because the new syntactic function makes the listener forget that they heard it two phrases before.

Martin Ulrich draws our attention to how Schumann employs contrapuntal techniques as early as Variation 1: "In Etude I [the composer] invents and develops, in a 4-voice *fugato* exposition, a countersubject proving to be a counterpoint of the theme which appears in bar 5"⁶ (Ulrich 2005: 52).

Etude II

The soprano voice of the theme in bars 1-4 is now moved in the bass voice. It's interesting to note that Johannes Brahms employs in Variation 1 from his op. 9 the same compositional technique. Unlike Schumann, who will only retain the first four bars of the theme's melody, Brahms reprises it almost entirely when changing its function and turning it into the bass voice. But with Schumann the general texture is different too: the soprano voice introduces a new theme, and the inner voices carry an accompaniment of repeated chords.

This variation is hymn-like, resolute, first of all because of the new theme in the soprano voice (see Ex. 3), but also because of the repeated chords.

By the modulation to A major and the dynamics change (*piano*), the character becomes more lyrical in bar 14, resuming its initial state on the last eighth note of the bar.

⁶ "In Etüde I wird ein Kontrasubjekt erfunden und in einer vierstimmigen Fugato-Exposition durchgeführt, bevor es sich als Gegenstimme zum Takt 5 einsetzenden Hauptthema erweist."



Ex. 3. Robert Schumann, *Symphonic Etudes, Etude II, soprano voice, bars 1-4.*

In actual performance, I experienced the hymn-like and resolute character intuited when silently reading the score with a very cantabile expression which turned it passionate, pathetic. Describing this variation, Alexandru Leahu speaks in similar terms: “as early as the second tableau, the declamatory, pathetic élan of the upper voice is supported by three distinct levels of sound, in a grandiose ‘orchestration’” (Leahu 1976: 144).

In addition to the incipit of the theme, there is another passage quoted identically in Variation 2: the melody of the soprano voice from bars 9-10. This fragment is no longer in the bass voice (like in phrase 1), but in the tenor voice in bars 9-10. This quotation is followed by two bars (bars 11-12) in which Schumann uses a contrapuntal writing (canon) first between the upper voices (bar 11, where the semantic tension diminishes due to both the melodic descent and to the dominant harmony resolving on the tonic chord), then between bass and soprano (bar 12, where the semantic tension augments due, among others, to the ascending melody; this increase in tension is signalled by the composer himself, with *crescendo*).

This variation poses the performer serious difficulties, as they have to split into two or even three in order to independently highlight the three (even four, in bars 9-12) simultaneous orchestral compartments. They must indeed be endowed with a “transcendental” technique!

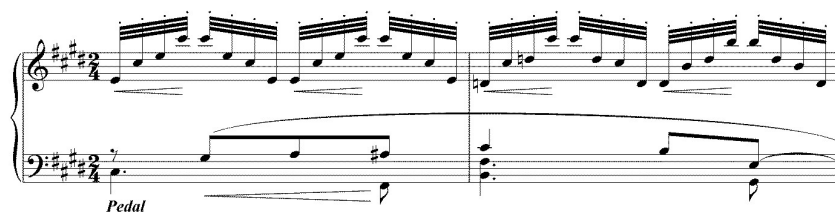
Etude III

This variation is rather “schizoid”, as it joins the virtuosity of *staccato* arpeggios in the right hand with the cantabile, dreaming, poetic, pleading and *legato* expression of the 2-voice melodies in the left hand. Looking closely at the right-hand arpeggios we see that they form a latent polyphony, with beautiful retardations, suspensions and resolutions. A transcendental technique is required here too, the pianist must be able to maintain that inner peace which allows them to carry homogenously and smoothly all these melodic lines (without any notes accented by mistake, too soft or inaudible).

As Schumann intended, around 1836 (Appel 2010: 169), to call this work *Twelve Etudes of the League of David* (*Zwölf Etüden der Davidsbündler*), there is the legitimate question of which etude corresponds to which league member? Florestan in Etude II? Eusebius in Etude III?...

I notice a certain unity of the first three etudes, given not by their similar character (they are very different from one another in this respect), but by the presence of what we could call a motivic figure: the ascending scale appearing as early as the opening bar of Etude I. In Etude II it is present at the end of the large sections, full of élan, “orchestrated” in double octaves, in a dotted rhythm and in *fortissimo*. To me, this variation describes Florestan.

The ascending scale is featured in Etude III too, but it is camouflaged and chromatinized (the beginning of the variation, upper voice in the left hand in Ex. 4) in *piano* and *pianissimo* (in the reprise).



Ex. 4. Robert Schumann, *Symphonic Etudes*, *Etude III*, bars 1-2.

This must be the dreamy Eusebius. Besides, in this variation a typically Schumannian harmonic sequence appears, also present in one of the lieder op. 24 (no. 3, *Ich wandelte unter den Bäumen*), which relates a lover's reverie (Charles Rosen found that bars 9-13 of this lied rank among the most impressive passages in all Romantic music; Rosen 2003: 665⁷). The modulation to the relative minor from bar 9 is repeated almost identically in Etude III from op. 13, bar 3. The only different element is that degree II of the major key and degree IV of the minor key already appear on the major tonic chord, unlike in the lied, where it takes the form of a 4-3 appoggiatura on the tonic of the relative minor. Specific to this Schumannian modulation is the chromatic raised fifth in the major chord, thus sending to the tonic of the relative minor, the bottom note prolonged, turning from the prime of the major chord into the third of the minor chord. I believe that this modulation was a key factor

⁷ “The next four bars – *The old dreaming came and slipped into my heart* – are among the most powerful in all of Romantic music” (Rosen 2003: 665).

in determining Rosen to classify this passage as part of the most impressive moments in Romantic music. Also interesting in Etude III is the fact that section B is in stark contrast with section A, because of the dynamics (*forte*), the precipitated thirty-second notes in a serpentine motion, with wide leaps and syncopations towards the higher register followed by melodic arpeggiated drops, and the *sf*. This B is Florestan all over again.

Etude IV

With its ostinato motion, short chords in spondaic rhythm in both hands, this variation is like a military march. Such rhythmic monotony is attenuated by the dotted rhythm in bars 6, 7 and 8. The compositional technique is one polyphonic, a 2-voice canon (the upper and lower voices of the chords in the two hands playing, almost throughout the variation, in octave unison).

The performer can accentuate and support the final *crescendo* spanning seven bars (as per the composer's markings) by using an ever longer pedal on each quarter note starting from bar 4 before the conclusion.

Etude V

This variation, in conjunction with the previous one (its first chord in the left hand is the one which had ended Etude IV) has a humorous character, explicitly indicated by the composer by the marking *scherzando*. Written in 12/8, the dominating rhythm (with the exception of bars 7 and 15, where there is a constant eighth-note pulsation) is dotted: eighth note, sixteenth note rest, sixteenth note, eighth note. This rhythmic motif is related to that in bars 6-8 of the previous variation, yet another unifying factor of the two variations.

Etude VI

The composer marked the beginning of this variation *Agitato*. The corresponding character is apparent because of the syncopations in the left hand, which create the feeling of unrest by not making it clear where the bar begins: the first note in the left hand is just a pickup or the beginning of the first beat? This is a case of poetic meter ambiguity. The consistent accents that Schumann wrote throughout underline the conflictual state of the two 2-eighth-notes meters, shifted.

Etude VII

This is a bright, energetic and enthusiastic variation, mainly because of its iambic meter which pervades it, present in the first eight bars only in the soprano and bass voices. Schumann marks it *sempre brillante*. The performer will find

that an exact reading of his indications is very useful here (and not only here). For example, to the ^ accents, at first present on the strong beats, *sf* is added in bars 5 and 6 on the second beat, the two accents disappearing in bars 7 and 8. In bar 6 before the end, a relative *subito piano* is advisable (even if not noted by the composer himself), because the following *crescendo* lasts for six bars. If there is no *subito piano*, the effect of the *crescendo* is, in my opinion, compromised.

Etude VIII

The peak of hopelessness and despair of the whole work is reached here. As such, with regard to its relation to the spiritual paradigm (see introduction),⁸ it will mainly have a profane, open to the demonic, character. Everything is exaggerated in this variation: Schumann requires a *sempre marcattissimo* method of attack, it abounds in > accents and *sforzandi*, the melody is fragmented by large octave leaps towards the higher register. The precipitated rhythms, dotted eighth note followed by thirty-second or sixty-four notes triplets may be influenced by the *danse macabre*-like opening of the second theme of Liszt's Piano Concerto in A Major, but also by the Baroque French overture.

The fact that on the eighth place there is an allusion to the rhythm and structure of the French overture raises associations with the "overture" that Bach placed at the middle of his *Goldberg Variations*; at the same time, Etude VIII is a model of how Schumann evoked states of mind by means of a characteristic contrapuntal writing, going backwards through historical style quotations.⁹ (Edler 2006: 220)

Etude IX

The semantic character of this etude is similar to that of Liszt's *Gnomes* or of some of Mendelssohn's pieces (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Rondo capriccioso*). It has something grotesque, subversive (which would tilt the balance in favour of the profane character mainly open to the demonic), but also something joyful in it (which would tilt the balance in favour of the bright

⁸ "Profane music open to the demonic is that whose character is compatible with the demonic state, enslaving the soul and body" (Ciocan 2012: 48-49).

⁹ "Das an achter Stelle auf den Rhythmus und die Satzstruktur der Französischen Ouvertüre angespielt wird, erweckt Assoziationen an die in der Werkmitte von Bachs *Goldberg-Variationen* stehende «Ouvertüre»; gleichzeitig stellt die achte Etüde ein Musterbeispiel von Schumanns Evozierung von Stimmungen durch eine spezifische Kontrapunktik dar, die sich weitab von historischen Stilziten bewegt."

sphere, that of the sacred). The subversive, dull character can be located in bars 17-22 (around the beginning of the ascent culminating in bar 33) and in the final bars (65-79).

Etude X

Another precious character marking from the composer: *Con energia sempre*. If the performer accentuates the hardened side of this variation, things can easily slip into the zone open to the demonic. The pickup, 4-sixteenth notes motif (a sixteenth note preceded by a 3-sixteenth notes pickup) is repeated continuously, obsessively, but Schumann crafts it very imaginatively as regards melodic and harmonic structure, which makes this variation not a purely sports, technical mechanics etude, but a piece of a particular aesthetic value.

Etude XI

The motivic structure of this variation reveals that the theme can be divided into 2-sound (sub)motifs (thus eliminating the ordinary character that bar 1 of the theme would have had, had it been considered as a single motif composed of a descending C# minor arpeggio). This is consistent with bar 3, as it forms a motif composed of a descending third.

Concerning the relation with the spiritual paradigm, this variation has, I believe, the character of a prayer request. From the established terminology, the word *reuig* (penitent) could be, I think, used – which Schumann himself did, in his piece for piano four hands *Bilder aus Osten*. The polyphonic structure of this variation (two voices built on the imitation principle in the right hand accompanied by a 2-voice *tremolo* in the left hand) in fact reminds us of the counterpoint of earlier eras, when sacred music was predominant.

Etude XII (Finale)

“The finale, adopting the key of the major harmony transposed enharmonically – Db – has the scope of an *allegro* sonata run by triumphant fanfare jubilations” (Leahu 1976: 145). Schumann has indeed found the solution to the compositional problem he talked about in the letter quoted at note 2. This finale is in rondo form. The refrain has a triumphant, somewhat noisy character, the two couplets (almost identical, if we overlook the different keys: Ab major and Gb major) are lyrical in the first half (around 30 bars). “No composer of equal stature expressed in his works his tangible love so clearly, so much”¹⁰ (Brendel 2001: 196) as Schumann. To exemplify Alfred Brendel’s

¹⁰ “Kein Komponist vergleichbarer Bedeutung, der seine konkrete Liebe so klar, so

statement I chose the opening motif of the couplet marked *animato*. This motif is quoted in a very similar form in the lied "Süßer Freund, du blickest" from *Frauen-Liebe und Leben*, illustrating the words of the phrase "Bleib an meinem Herzen, fühle dessen Schlag" ["Stay by my heart, feel how it beats"].

DINU CIOCAN'S¹¹ PRINCIPLES OF GRADED APPROXIMATION OF THE MUSICAL SEMANTIC CHARACTER IN THE NATURAL LANGUAGE

For a systematic analysis of the semantic character of Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes* I will use a list of 25 adjectives. Employing the same list in the evaluation of all variations is important for their comparison, the list acting as a balance.

I took most of the adjectives from Victor Giuleanu's *Curs de teoria muzicii* [Music Theory Textbook] (Chapter 9: *Expresii privind caracterul execuției (interpretării) artistice* [Expressions pertaining to the character of a work's artistic performance]; Giuleanu 2002: 261-264). These terms come from several languages and suggest the feeling that a particular piece expresses.

Diversity was an important selection criterion, as I wished to cover as wide a palette as possible: *pious, demonic, simple, festive, fiery, joyful, mysterious, grave, bright, precipitated, arrogant, intimate, funny, penitent, tranquil, gentle, longing, sighing, strong, sad, dignified, angry, tender, hesitating and dance-like*.

I will use an evaluation system based on the 5-valued logic for truth-value judgements: 1; 0,75; 0,50; 0,25; and 0. These truth values correspond to qualifiers: *certain, very likely, likely, unlikely, impossible*. A more graded evaluation of the different pieces' (or in this case, variations') character can be thus obtained, as compared to the use of bivalent logic truth values, *true* and *false*.

For clarification, here is a fictive example: for the adjective *happy*, Variation X receives 0,50 (it's *likely* that it is happy), Variation Y receives 1 (it's *certain* that it is happy), Variation Z receives 0 (it's *impossible* that it is happy), Variation W receives 0,75 (it's *very likely* that it is happy) and Variation Q receives 0,25 (it's *unlikely* that it is happy). Had I used the bivalent logic truth values (0 and 1), the only two qualifiers would have been *certainly* or *impossible*, while a 5-valued logic approach allows for a graded appreciation.

In the table below (see Table 1), containing the analysis of the semantic character with the help of the 5-valued logic, I used the abbreviation *T* for the theme, *V1* for Variation (etude) 1, *V2* for Variation 2 etc.

sehr in seinen Stücken mitgeteilt hätte."

¹¹ See Ciocan 2000: 77 and *Doctoral Conferences*, 2017-2019.

Semantic character	T	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11	V12
Pious	1	0	0,25	0,25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0,50
Demonic	0	0,25	0,25	0,25	0,25	0,50	0,75	0,25	0,50	1	0,50	0	0
Simple	0,50	0	0	0	0,25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0,75	0,25
Festive	0	0,25	0,25	0	0,50	0,50	0	0,75	0	0,25	0	0	1
Fiery	0	0	0,50	0,25	0	0,25	1	0,75	0,50	0,25	1	0	0,50
Joyful	0	0,25	0	0,50	0,50	0,75	0	1	0	0,75	0	0	1
Mysterious	0,25	1	0	0	0	0,25	0	0	0	1	0	0,25	0
Grave	1	0,25	1	0	0,50	0	0,25	0,25	1	0	0,75	0,25	0,50
Bright	0	0,25	0,50	0,25	0,50	0,75	0,50	1	0,25	0,50	0,75	0	1
Precipitated	0	0,25	0,50	0	0	0	1	0,75	0	0,50	0,25	0	0,25
Arrogant	0,50	0,50	0,25	0	0,75	0,25	1	0,50	0,25	0	1	0	0,50
Intimate	0,50	0	0,25	0,75	0	0,25	0	0	0	0,25	0	1	0,50
Funny	0	0,50	0	0	0,25	1	0	0,50	0	0,75	0	0	0,50
Penitent	1	0	0,50	0,25	0	0	0	0	0,50	0	0	1	0
Tranquil	1	0,50	0,25	0,50	0,25	0,25	0	0	0	0	0	0,75	0,50
Gentle	0,75	0,50	0	1	0	0,25	0	0	0	0,25	0	1	0,25
Longing	0,75	0,25	0,50	1	0	0	1	0	0,25	0	0,25	0,75	0,50
Sighing	0,50	0	0	0,75	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Strong	0	0,25	0,50	0	0,75	0	0,75	1	1	0,25	1	0	1
Sad	1	0,25	0,75	0,25	0	0	0,50	0	1	0	0,75	1	0
Dignified	0,75	0,50	1	0,25	0,50	0	0,25	0,75	1	0	0,75	0,50	0,75
Angry	0	0	0,75	0,25	0,50	0	1	0,25	0,75	0	0,50	0	0
Tender	0,25	0,25	0	1	0	0,25	0	0	0	0	0	0,50	0,75
Hesitating	0,25	0	0	1	0	0,25	0	0	0	0	0	0,75	0
Dance-like	0	0,50	0	0,25	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0,50	0,75

Table 1. Analysis of the semantic character of Schumann's Symphonic Variations.

LANDMARK RECORDINGS AND ELEMENTS OF COMPARATIVE VERSIONS (SVIATOSLAV RICHTER AND WILHELM KEMPF)¹²

I intend to make a technical and musical comparison between the two renditions and to argue my opinions.

Sviatoslav Richter generally emphasises virtuosity more than Wilhelm Kempff.

With the Russian pianist, the theme has sad character, giving the feeling of something irreparable. Kempff is rather hardened, outraged, coming close to Richter's character only in the last bars. In the context created by the way he played the previous passages, this very softening of character towards the conclusion acquires a different meaning: subtle dejection, or a state of wondering, as if faced with an unexpected event...

In Etude I, Kempff is somewhat tenebrous, dark, the soprano voice only brightening in the second half, when it reaches the melodic peak on G⁴. Richter is vehement, in the manner of Kempff's theme, I would say. The tempo is faster in Richter, the sound clearer (therefore brighter), and upon reaching the melodic maximum of the soprano voice he changes the character, turning it into one romantic, sentimental, with the help of tasteful *rubato*.

Richter plays the first half of Etude II more concisely and, the second time, slightly more dreamily (the first four bars especially). The same can be said about the second half, although Richter returns to the more concise character as early as bar 3 of the repetition. Kempff plays it in a much slower tempo, thus rendering it human in a convincing and expressive way and making it sound like an aria or a lied. The psychological spectrum contains a variety of feelings, from pathetic sadness to indignation.

In Etude III, Richter shows a technical accuracy to be envied. Compared to Richter's, Kempff's tempo is more a "practice" tempo. Yet, with Richter, the A sections are very similar to an etude in the sense of a technical exercise. Maybe an occasional minimum of freedom as regards tempo would have changed things. Kempff is just as reserved (the permanent thirty-second note motion in the right hand apparently prevents them from thinking about the possibility of sometimes taking more time, as singers often would), but succeeds in being more suggestive in his underlining of the melodic profile in the left hand, by means of a more marked dynamic. In B, Kempff takes the way Schumann distributed the *sforzato ad litteram*, thus making it very easy to

¹² In Naxos Music Library: Schumann, R.: *Etüdes symphoniques* (Richter) Musical Concepts, Catalogue No. ALC 1136; Piano Recital: Kempff, Wilhelm, Deutsche Grammophon, Catalogue No. 00028947903154.

hear that the first two *sforzatos* are consecutive (see Ex. 5) and the following two are simultaneous (which isn't so clear with Richter).

The image shows a musical score for Robert Schumann's Symphonic Etudes, Etude III, bars 9-12. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It features a piano (p) and forte (f) dynamic contrast. The first two sforzatos are consecutive, and the following two are simultaneous. The score includes a crescendo marking and a sf (sforzando) marking.

Ex. 5. Robert Schumann, Symphonic Etudes, Etude III, bars 9-12.

Etude IV sounds similar with both two pianists: like a military march. With Richter, the tempo is imperceptibly faster. Because he also sometimes plays chords with more pedal (Kempff consistently follows their brevity), they become, towards the end of the variation, menacingly monotonous. To avoid such monotony, Kempff at times diminishes the volume and even abandons some of Schumann's *sforzatos*, thus obtaining a more varied profile of the curve of the semantic tension.

In Etude V, Richter adopts (as in Etude III) the technical line, with a very fast tempo. The dynamic contrast from B produces, in him, the effect of a fright. Kempff's slower tempo gives this variation a more quietening character, succeeding in highlighting (with the help of subtle dynamic differentiations too) particularly beautiful formal structures.

Richter imprints Etude VI with a malicious, that is, demonic character, by means of a monotonous and rather brutal *forte*. Kempff is much more humane, brings for instance a ray of light on the modulation to E major. The last chord takes us by surprise by a harsh accent, out of place, in my opinion.

In Etude VII, Kempff will still not overuse the *forte* marking, the diversity of character originating in a variety of colour; Richter is less successful in his attempt to do so.

In Etude VIII Kempff adopts a faster tempo than Richter (he is closer to Schumann's metronome marking, quarter note = 80, which would determine

a more animated tempo) and is less aggressive. With Kempff, the chord on the first beat in bar 10 is so short (without pedal) the first time that, probably without intending it, he obtains a comical effect (there is another recording by Kempff, from 1950,¹³ where this chord is contained by the pedal the first time too). In bar 3, because of the technical difficulties posed by leaps in the left hand, Kempff deforms the triplet rhythm.

In Etude IX, the German pianist creates a mysterious-gloomy atmosphere in bar 73, through loudness contrasts (*forte-piano*) and timbre change. His phrasing is very clear, facilitated also by the relatively comfortable tempo he adopts. Richter chooses a faster tempo and nevertheless phrases just as clearly. In bars 11-13 and 14-16 he imprints the music with a lyrical note, by a subtle tempo (slowing down). The last three bars are played in a very precise *a tempo*, which is adequate, I believe, to this conclusion, giving the impression that the music suddenly disappears, evaporates.

In Etude X, Richter has a machine-like technical precision and reminds me of Schumann's Toccata Op. 7. The only moment he indulges in a slight *rubato* is the reprise of bar 11 (from the second half of the variation). His tempo is very fast, as expected, but this doesn't prevent him from being musical and from following closely each of the two hands' melodic profile. With Kempff, the uninterrupted sixteenth-notes motion (in the left hand, except for the last two bars of the two sections, where they are played by the right hand) conjures up the image of a mountain river flowing freely and unevenly.

In Etude XI, Kempff masterfully distinguishes the five sonic planes, three in the left hand (the bass voice, the embellishment and the voice of finger 1) and two in the right hand. With Richter, this variation has a touch of Russian music. Unlike Kempff, he takes his time in the transitions between phrases.

Richter imprints the beginning of the second couplet in the final etude (XII) with modesty and simplicity. In the refrain, very interesting in his rendition are the contrasting colours in bars 3-4 and the emphasis of the fifth eighth note in bar 10, by means of which the motif acquires a different meaning. Kempff adopts a more patriarchal tempo, but this allows him to play very orchestrally and to artfully highlight harmonic changes. He vies the last two bars as a pickup, as we can infer from his pedal use (in the next to last bar he releases the pedal on the first beat, playing the chord *staccato*).

¹³ In Naxos Music Library: Kempff, Wilhelm: 1950s *Solo Recordings (Complete)*, Decca, Catalogue No. 00028947439325.

The *Symphonic Etudes* are a touchstone for any pianist, as they “form the most balanced work, the closest to fulfilling its own model, in all of Schumann’s oeuvre” (Leahu 1976: 145).

To play them, the pianist must master a large palette of nuances, from *pp* (in Etude I, III, IX, XI etc.) to *fff* (in the final variation), and a solid technique, many of the variations¹⁴ seriously putting virtuosity to the test (as for example Etude IX, which features an acrobatic octave passage in the left hand while the right hand plays homorhythmic chords). Just as important is the employ of subtle differentiations in dynamics, tempo and method of attack (articulation – which to my mind is the way that *legato* and more or less *staccato* notes are distributed in a motif, for example – can be greatly aided by a judicious pedal use), so that the performer can highlight as much as possible the polyphonic richness Schumann’s text abounds in (the remark is applicable to his piano oeuvre as a whole).

Differentiated dynamics for the various registers and the varied method of attack combined with an adequate pedal use are the tools by means of which the pianist can create different timbre, quite welcomed here, the *Symphonic Etudes* having something of the orchestral in them, as we learn from their very title.

Schumann succeeds in creating very diverse semantic characters and in making the piano imitate a series of orchestral effects while also contriving difficulties even for the technically skilled and often using contrapuntal compositional techniques.

English version by Maria Monica Bojin

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¹⁴ “The imitative octave concurrence in Etude V or the chord cascades in etudes VI, VII, IX and X, each time with a different configuration, are, too, bravura elements which turn this cycle into one of the best concert pieces” (Leahu 1976: 144).

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