

## Robert Schumann



**The Life and Struggles of Robert Schumann:**

Robert Schumann's life is one of the most well documented by his own hands. He often wrote in his diary of his struggles, his desires and when he had sex. Through the marvelous preservation of his autobiography, the thoughts of the mind of the most progressive composers of the early nineteenth century remains intact for future composers to learn from to become a part of the larger musical community.

Robert Schumann was born June 8th 1810 in the little town of Zwickau, Germany. His parents were Johanne Christiane and August Schumann. August was an extremely hardworking and successful publisher. He had knack for understanding the book market and had sharp instincts to publish quickly popular works. (Worthen, 2007, p. 12) Schuman's father's success is marked by the impressive sum his estate was worth on his death, about 60,000 thaler. If properly invested, anyone in the family could live well off on the interest alone. Robert was, essentially, in a well to do middle class family.

Because of Augusts' profession, Robert had access to a wide range of written works. Robert consumed book after book and he eventually started writing his own work. By the age of nine, Robert had already written plays that he performed with the help of his brothers and friends. (Worthen, 2007, p. 4) He was a charming, warm, charismatic, fun and outgoing child who really enjoyed reading.

Robert was not a musical prodigy as a child. His immersion into music was by his mother who would sing several arias from operas by ear and encourage him to sing with her. (Worthen, 2007, p. 4) Robert's father was truly the one who supported his musicality. August absolutely praised his son's ability to sing with "beautiful intonation and right rhythm." August eventually sent young Robert to study piano with the mediocre, but well reputed Johann Gottfried Kuntsch. Robert's successful advancement and his father support for Robert's ability at the piano is marked by August buying a grand piano for Robert to play on.

Kuntsch provided Robert with a medium for composition, but did not provide him with lessons in harmony and counterpoint. Yet despite these disadvantages, Robert still managed to compose music. Although not for piano, Robert amateurishly composed for orchestra and chorus at the age of eleven. (Worthen, 2007, p. 4) Robert eventually grew fed up with taking lessons from Kuntsch. Kuntsch emphasized the seriousness of older music and was dismissive of modern works that Robert greatly desired to work on. Consequently, Robert found himself teaching himself the foundations of music that Kuntsch did not. (Worthen, 2007, p. 9)

Schumann's life has been plagued with the death of members of his family and close friends. It starts with the death of his eldest sister Emilie, who may have committed suicide, and continues with his father's death in 1826, when Robert was just sixteen years old. Robert was devastated by his father's death. After all, August was more supportive of Robert's creative and artistic endeavors. His mother was "non-intellectual and profoundly prejudiced against the artistic profession." August "had decided that I [Robert] would be a musician." (Worthen, 2007, p. 7) August had shown an attempt to get Carl von Weber to give Robert lessons if Weber hadn't soon passed away.

When Robert would come of age, his father stipulated to provide funding to Robert to attend a University. Robert jumped on the opportunity. His hometown of Zwickau had a meager population of about 7,000 and the nearest university in Leipzig had a population of 50,000. Clearly, Robert had some idea that the musical and cultural life would have been an incredible improvement to his current situation. In addition, He would receive a new found freedom and independence that, even today, many college students look forward.

Although Robert chose to study law in Leipzig, the work he did outside of class was more fulfilling to him. Namely, his "studentextremities" (Worthen, 2007, p. 20), that is, his hearty alcohol consumption and his enjoyment of women all of which is seen in his frequently complaint of hangover

night after night. All kidding aside, Robert was constantly reading and absorbing information from a huge range of works, especially his favorite author Jean Paul. Robert disproportionate time devoted to playing piano and studies outside of law lead his friend Emile Flechsig to believe that he had never even stepped foot in a lecture (Worthen, 2007, p. 20); however, because some of his course work was rewarded "with commendable diligence," Robert at least applied himself to some of his studies. (Worthen, 2007, p. 20)

Robert's involvement with the musical life in Leipzig led him to making friends in several social circles, one of which led him to meet the piano teacher Friedrich Wieck. Robert enrolled with Wieck as a student and was for the first time since Kuntsch that he had a proper piano lesson. Wieck and Schumann would often quarrel, usually, because Robert, regardless what Wieck advised, was stubborn to follow Wiecks directions. Since leaving Kuntsch seven years earlier, Robert's main involvement in piano playing had been improvisation. Robert simply had no training, and he had been hard pressed to change his way of playing which he had been enjoying for the last few years. Wieck constantly had Schumann working on elementary finger exercises to improve his fundamental skills of playing. Robert was more interested in less menial work to improve his playing.

Robert grew to dislike if, he hadn't already, his studies in law. July 30 , 1830 Schumann wrote to his mother requesting to leave the university and instead direct his funds to a career in music with Wieck as his instructor. All of Roberts charm, wit and tenderness were not enough to calm her concerns about financial stability as a musician. Schumann's mother consulted Wieck about it. Wieck was confident in his abilities as a teacher; after all he had raised his daughter, Clara, into a virtuoso. Wieck reassured Frau Schumann that in three years time he will turn Robert into one of the greatest pianists Europe would ever see, and to reassure that time would not be wasted he stipulated for a six month

probationary period. If all causes were lost on Robert then time and, more importantly, money would not be wasted.

Needless to say, Robert continued beyond Wieck's initial six month trial. Eight months after the start of the trial period, Wieck recommended that Robert should start studying music theory and composition lessons with the young Heinrich Dorn. (Worthen, 2007, p. 61) Even though Robert had no formal training, Dorn would comment that Robert's works were nothing to snide at, even if they did break many of the "rules" of music theory.

At this point in time two very important characters entered Robert's life in 1931, i.e., Eusebius and Florestan. These were the characters that Schumann frequently portrayed in his music. Eusebius is quiet, reflective, withdrawn and pensive and contrastingly, Florestan is young, revolutionary, hotheaded, and cheerful. These characters were inspired by Schumann's own personality. In His childhood, he was more Florestan, outgoing and charming, and as an adult he became more and more Eusebius, withdrawn and pensive.

Over a year into his lessons, Robert noticed a tingling sensation in his hand; His third and fourth fingers were getting numb. The numbing of his fingers was caused mostly by training tool the chiroplast (Perrey, 2007, p. 11) The hand is placed in the device and held in place while fingers are individually stretched back in order to strengthen them. Schumann, after turning his "whole house into an apothecary," gave up on his career as a pianist. (Worthen, 2007, p. 69) Robert's still longed for a career in music and he devoted himself to composition instead.

Although Robert sought out to be a composer, he still tried to work on a steady source of income. Robert tapped into his love of literature by starting the musical paper *Neue Leipziger Zeitschrift für Musik* with a collection of "young musical hotheads." (Worthen, 2007, p. 95) The paper would include critiques of composers and performers written by its members and additional contributors.

After many of the “hotheads” had worked less and less on the paper and Robert worked more and more, he eventually bought the rights to own the paper himself and renamed it *Neue Zeitschrift*.

Schumann was far from modest with his interaction with women. A part of his “studentextremities” was his charm with women. He performed “finger exercises, musical turns and scales under their skirts” (Worthen, 2007, p. 21) Schumann’s promiscuity in his early adulthood is the very source that may have cost him his sanity and his life. Robert is believed to have contracted syphilis from a woman only known as Christel. Her link with Robert contracting syphilis is from his diary entries describing the wound found on his genitals after having sex that are describe as painless chancres associated with syphilis. (Worthen, 2007, p. 72)

Robert’s relationship with Wieck was not limited to the piano room. Robert was a frequent guest in Wieck’s home. He was deeply involved with the Wieck’s social life and would going out drinking with Wieck. Naturally, Robert would be introduced to Wieck’s daughter Clara. He would teas her and entertain her with fairy tales and riddles. (Worthen, 2007, p. 78) Even after Robert stopped taking lessons from Wieck, he and Clara maintained a close friendship. Clara did not go to school and had private tutors come to her home instead; she was very isolated and had few friends of her own age. A brotherly figure, like Schumann, would be extremely important in her life.

Robert and Clara’s relationship was not love at first sight. When Robert first met Clara, in 1828, she was only nine and he was eighteen. In fact, Robert had not shown any deep interest in Clara until after he ended his secret engagement with Ernestine von Fricken, around 1835. (Worthen, 2007, p. 100) Clara herself was jealous of Robert’s affair, showing some of her inclination towards him. (Worthen, 2007, p. 111) Immediately after the end of his engagement, Robert made the first move of a kiss with Clara and started what would become one of the most romantic love stories of the musical world. (Worthen, 2007, p. 116)

Despite Robert and Clara's secrecy, Wieck had caught wind of their relationship and forbade Robert from seeing Clara. Yet despite Wieck's ban, they still managed to maintain correspondence with each other through mail. Robert would write to her using fake names like "Dr. Eduard Kirchner." (Worthen, 2007, p. 142) Wieck even tried to move Clara away so that she could press onward with her career. After all, Wieck's life work had been to turn his daughter into a world renowned pianist; Robert would only hamper her from continuing her career at her full potential.

Deeply in love, Schumann wanted to marry Clara. After several refusals to consent to his daughter's marriage, Wieck softened up and would only allow Robert to marry Clara with two conditions that he knew Robert could not meet. (Worthen, 2007, p. 150) Firstly, Robert must show that he can make 2,000 thalers salary a year and the second, both Robert and Clara would move out of Leipzig. Even though Robert tried to meet both of these demands Robert could hardly make more than 1,320 thalers and would lose a portion of his income from being unable to continue publishing *Neue Zeitschrift*. (Worthen, 2007, p. 169)

Although Wieck was over the top with his demands, he had some reasoning behind them. Clara was raised her entire life to be a musician, not to be a wife. She needed servants, pianos, lessons, transportation, and concert planners. Even if Clara's concerts would bring in money, all of these things require substantial amount of overhead that would not necessarily be made back by a performance. Robert grew weary of Wieck's ridiculous demands and took him to court.

Even during the proceedings of a trial Wieck was extremely stubborn. He would do everything he could to delay the process by not showing up to court or mediation, the fines were worth it to him. Wieck even tried to play dirty by sending out his *Erklärung* (a declaration which states his opposition to Schumann) to friends to have them published in several cities to ruin Schumann's reputation. (Worthen, 2007, p. 181)

When Wieck and Schumann finally got to court, Wieck had two main arguments. Firstly, Schumann could not bring in a reliable income to support his daughter. Wieck criticized Schumann's ability as a composer. Wieck argued that Schumann's music wouldn't sell; it was difficult to play and unpopular. Secondly, Wieck accused Robert of having poor moral character and being a drunkard based on his "student extremities." Wieck even tried to get Ernestine von Fricken to divulge her secret engagement to Robert Schumann.

Schumann was able to throw off the charges of being unable to financially support Clara, even after Wieck has tried an appeal. Robert had gotten substantial help from some of his most famous musical contemporaries such as Franz Liszt and Ignaz Moscheles. (Worthen, 2007, p. 184) Robert, in his *Refutationsschrift* (rebuttal), argued that even if Wieck thought his music was no good, why would he regularly encourage his daughter to play his music?

The charges of Schumann's "tendency to drink" needed to be dealt with. Robert had protected himself by speaking to his drinking buddies ahead of time who were strong supporters of his marriage with Clara. (Worthen, 2007, p. 189) Aside from that there were many witnesses that supported Robert's good character. Robert even accused Wieck of being at many of Robert's social drinking events being the last one to leave. In the end Wieck had no evidence to present to the court and simply "renounced giving of the evidence" which he was entitled. (Worthen, 2007, p. 195)

The court ruled in favor of Schumann. Clara and Robert got married in Schönefeld on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1840, a day before when Clara would turn twenty-one. (Worthen, 2007, p. 199) Wieck was sent to jail for slandering Robert and although Robert was hesitant at first, eventually returned on good terms with Wieck. (Wieck really wanted to see his grandkids.)

Contrary to Wieck's beliefs, Clara still continued her career as a concert pianist. She still toured through different countries making significant contributions to her household income. (Worthen,



2007, p. 248) Clara's soirées after her performances would lead to introductions with royalty, such as the Russian tsar. (Worthen, 2007, p. 240) Robert was not left behind during these tours. He was often a guest of honor. Clara would perform many of his works while touring which spread his music to a much wider audience.

Although Clara could bring in significant amounts of money into the household, Robert was the main bread winner. Robert was in a constant search of steady income outside of his compositions, especially because He had stopped the music publication of *Neue Zeitschrift*. Robert would give composition lessons, and seek full time work to maintain his life style.

The dissemination of Robert's works through tours with Clara and frequent publication had given him some renowned. After serving in a few other positions, one as a composition professor, his popularity and fame would eventually find him a position as the director of music in Düsseldorf. (Worthen, 2007, p. 317) This position paid a modest salary, but it was steady income that required little work; however, taking the position could have been one of the worst decisions of his career.

Robert's main responsibility was to conduct and lead both the orchestra and chorus in Düsseldorf. Conducting was the poorest of Robert's skills, even though he had spent time trying to improve it. This did not stop Robert from taking his position very seriously; this can be seen in the heavy markings he made in Beethoven's seventh symphony. (Worthen, 2007, p. 317) Robert's issues were in the execution of his ideas. Often, Robert's beats were irregular, his directions unclear and he rarely cued entrances. (Worthen, 2007, p. 341) Robert's personality at the time was very introverted, like his character Eusebius. Robert was often "totally immersed in the score, paying little attention to the musicians." (Worthen, 2007, p. 321) Liszt even mentioned how quiet Schumann during a social meeting between the two. (Worthen, 2007, p. 261)

Robert slowly lost command of his chorus and orchestra. A few members wrote to the board of directors in Düsseldorf to attempt a *coup de director*. Instead of losing his position Robert was slowly stripped of his responsibilities that were given to his deputy director instead. (Worthen, 2007, p. 335) Robert was eventually reduced to only conducting performances; however, Robert felt betrayed by Düsseldorf and eventually gave up his position. (Worthen, 2007, p. 345)

Schumann had been cautious about the state of his health throughout his life. Much of Schumann's family had died young and he feared for both the longevity of his life and his sanity. Throughout Robert's adult life he suffered from "weakness of nerves," blackouts and numbing pains, all of which were precursory symptoms of something much worse. (Worthen, 2007, p. 369)

Robert's promiscuous youth began to catch up with him in 1854. That February Robert began getting auditory disturbances. Robert "kept hearing the same pitch and, in addition, at times another interval" (Worthen, 2007, p. 347) These bizarre sounds eventually tuned into music "that is so glorious with instruments sounding more wonderful than anyone hears on earth" (Worthen, 2007, p. 348) This story gets even stranger: the music turned into voices.

Robert was presenting characteristics of schizophrenia with auditory hallucinations. He fervently believed that the voices he was hearing were that of angels presenting him with "the most glorious revelations." (Worthen, 2007, p. 349) The voices too changed:

"A frightful change! The angels' voices transformed themselves into the voices of demons, with horrible music; they told him he was a sinner and they wanted to throw him into hell. In short, his condition grew into a veritable nervous paroxysm; he screamed in pain (for, as he told me afterwards, the embodiment of tigers and hyenas were rushing forward to seize him.)" (Worthen, 2007, p. 349)

Robert pleaded with Clara to send him to an asylum; Robert feared that he might do Clara some harm. (Worthen, 2007, p. 352)

After all Clara and Robert had been through, the entire struggle just to get married, Clara did not want Robert to simply abandon her and his family. In addition, Clara feared that if Robert was sent to an asylum he would lose all credibility as a composer, he might even pull down Clara's career as well; after all, she would be the sole breadwinner left in the house.

A significant turn of events would lead to Clara's consent for institutionalization. Although Robert was afraid to harm others, he was more of a threat to himself. One rainy day in February Robert sneaked past his watchful attendant, bargained his silk handkerchief to cross a toll bridge and jumped feet first into the Rhine. (Worthen, 2007, p. 356) Robert would have succumbed to the Rhine, either by drowning under the fast currents or hypothermia from the frigid waters. Robert was rescued by several nearby boatmen, despite struggling against them. (Worthen, 2007, p. 356)

Robert was admitted to the Asylum in Endenich. His ties with Clara had been severed, both by the doctors and close friends who told her to stay away. Robert was really unwell and acted as if he was not married to Clara by losing his wedding ring and rarely asking for her. (Worthen, 2007, p. 372)

While in Endenich Robert still composed and played music. Johannes Brahms, a late life friend frequently visited Robert. Brahms would accompany Robert with four handed works, even if the latter had trouble staying together with the former. They would often discuss Robert's written music and Brahms would send Robert new works to play on the asylum's out of tune piano. (Worthen, 2007, p. 349)

After several failed or discourage attempts to make plans to see Robert, Clara got to see Robert on July 27<sup>th</sup> 1856. Although Clara, in thought, was delighted to see him, the sight of him would make her depressed. Robert arms and legs twitched, he convulsed and he occasionally spoke with a violent voice. (Worthen, 2007, p. 384) Although Robert had difficulties remembering things, Clara was not one of them. Clara describes it:

“He smiled at me and, with a great effort, for he no longer had full control of his limbs, he wrapped his arms around me – never will I forget that. I would never give up this embrace, not even for all the treasures of the world... he spoke a great deal, always with the spirits as it seemed, and also could not bear anyone near him for long, or he would become restless, one could hardly understand anything at all anymore. Just once I understood “my,” no doubt he wanted to say “Clara,” for he was looking at me in a friendly way; then once again “I know” – “you,” probably.” (Worthen, 2007, p. 383)

Within a few days of Clara’s visit Robert was found dead in his room. He had died alone.

(Worthen, 2007, p. 389) Although Robert’s and Clara’s marriage had been less than fourteen years, for the rest of her life she worked to constantly promote the music of her husband to keep his legacy going even after his death. Robert’s life and love with Clara is tragic work of opera.

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