Discussion and Performance of Brahms's Variations on a theme of Schumann, op.9 in F sharp minor

Abstract

Johannes Brahms composed the Variations on a theme of Schumann in F sharp minor, op.9 during the summer of 1854, almost a year after he had first met Robert and Clara Schumann in Düsseldorf. During the early months of 1854, Brahms had carefully studied Schumann's works, and musicologists suggest that Brahms's op.9 variations display Schumann's influence on Brahms. The theme of Brahms's Schumann Variations was borrowed from Robert's first Albumblatt from Bunte Blätter, op.99 and Brahms was also inspired by Clara Schumann's Variations op.20, which was composed a year earlier and was based on the same theme.

In addition to borrowing the theme, there are several musical references to both Robert and Clara Schumann. The autograph shows that Brahms signed most of the variations with "B" for Brahms or "Kr", which stands for Kreisler, just as Schumann had signed "E" (Eusebius) or "F" (Florestan), or both at the end of each piece in his Davidsbündlertänze, op.6. Schumann's Davidsbündler and Brahms's Schumann Variations display similarities of texture such as the broken chords in the right hand and the arpeggiated chords in the left hand in some of variations. Brahms's variation 9 is perhaps the most striking and obvious connection to Schumann. It is a paraphrase of Schumann's second Albumblatt from Bunte Blätter op.99. Also, Clara Schumann's Variations op.20 was quoted in Brahms's Schumann Variations. The idea of variations within variation is, again, the influence of Schumann, as theme of the Symphonic Etudes reveals.

In Brahms's Schumann Variations, variations are linked together according to key and tempo, and the variations display "freer" form and harmonic structure. On the contrary, variations which were composed later, such as the Handel Variations, op.24 takes more of a traditional approach to the theme. The two sets of Paganini Variations, op.35, which were intended to be technical exercises, also
shows the influence of Schumann with similarities in texture.

The influence of Robert and Clara Schumann on Brahms are evident throughout Brahms’s *Schumann Variations*. One can draw endless parallels to each variation and Schumann’s piano pieces as we have discussed. Like Schumann’s *Symphonic Etudes*, Brahms’s *Schumann Variations* show free approach to the form rather than the more conventional models. It is certainly a beautiful work and it is unique, not only because of its freer form, but also because the music reveals Brahms’s inward personality.

**Key word**: Johannes Brahms, *Variations on a Theme of Schumann*, op.9, Robert Schumann, Clara Schumann, *Davidsbündlertänze*, op.6, *Albumblatt*, *Bunte Blätter*, op.99, *Variations on a Theme of Handel*, op.24

Johannes Brahms composed the *Variations on a theme of Schumann in F sharp minor* during the summer of 1854, almost a year after he had first met Robert and Clara Schumann in Düsseldorf. After their first encounter with Brahms, the Schumanns immediately recognized the twenty-year-old Brahms’s talent and became his great admirers. Robert, in his famous article “Neue Bahnen” (New Pathways), for *Der NeueZeitschrift für Musik* dated October 1853, described the young Brahms as if he had “sprung like Minerva fully armed from the head of the son of Cronus.” During the early months of 1854, Brahms carefully studied Schumann’s music, and according to musicologists such as Constantin Floros and Oliver Neighbour, Brahms’s op.9 variations display Schumann’s influence on Brahms.

Between May 29 and June 3 of 1853, Clara composed her op.20, a set of variations on the theme of her husband’s first Albumblatt from *Bunte Blätter*, op.99, for Robert’s birthday on June 8. It is a set of eight variations, as the finale has two complete variations with a connecting passage and coda. Clara’s set of variations was put aside for a year, and then on May 24, 1854, Clara played it for Brahms, and it was her variations that motivated Brahms to compose 16 variations on the same theme. By June 15, Brahms completed fourteen variations (variations 1–9, and 12–16), and the remaining two variations, variations 10 and 11, were added separately by August 12.

Brahms’s Schumann Variations received encouraging comments from friends.