

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born 8 June 1810 in Zwickau, Germany; died 29 July 1856 in Eendenich, near Bonn.

Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Opus 120 (1841, revised 1851)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Leipzig, 6 December 1841; Gewandhaus; Ferdinand David, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 7 January 1897; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 29 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

"I often feel tempted to crush my piano — it is too narrow for my thoughts," wrote Schumann in 1839 to Heinrich Dorn, his former composition teacher. "I really have very little practice in orchestral music now; still, I hope to master it." To that time (Schumann turned thirty the following summer), he had produced only songs and small-scale works for solo piano, with the exception of an abandoned symphony of 1832. Within a year of his words to Professor Dorn, Schumann received strong encouragement from three sources to act on his ambition to launch into the grander genres of music. First, the redoubtable Franz Liszt had taken up Schumann's piano works, especially the brilliant *Carnaval*, and convinced his young colleague that he was capable of bigger things. Liszt fired off several letters in 1838 and 1839 encouraging Schumann to forge ahead, even offering to arrange performances and seek out a publisher for him. Liszt was the brightest star in the European musical firmament at the time, and Schumann could hardly help but be swayed by his advice. As the second impetus toward undertaking an orchestral work, Schumann had discovered the wondrous Symphony No. 9 in C major of Franz Schubert among the papers of the late composer's brother in 1839. Schumann was ecstatic over his find, and he talked Mendelssohn into conducting the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in a performance of the work. Schumann called the Symphony "heavenly," and saw it as a masterful solution to the problem of infusing Classical form with the impetuous spirit of Romanticism, something after which he had striven for years.

Schumann's third source of encouragement was his beloved wife, Clara. Their long-hoped-for marriage finally took place in September 1840, and Clara, one of the greatest musicians and pianists of the 19th century, was soon coaxing her new husband to begin a symphony. Her urging had an immediate effect. The year 1841 was one of almost unmatched creativity for Schumann, during which he wrote not one but two symphonies, the first movement of what became his Piano Concerto, a hybrid orchestral work called *Overture, Scherzo and Finale* (Op. 52) and sketches for a C minor symphony that was never completed. He began the D minor Symphony in May, as soon as he finished the one in B-flat major (No. 1, "Spring"), and was able to present the manuscript as a gift to Clara for her birthday on September 13, 1841, also the day on which their first child was baptized. Schumann felt unsure of the orchestration of the new Symphony because of his limited background in writing for instruments, however, and, after hearing a trial performance of the work in December, he decided not to publish it. The score went into his desk drawer, where it lay untouched for a decade.

In 1851, after he had written two more symphonies (hence, this D minor Symphony became known as "Number 4," though it was the second he composed), Schumann undertook a revision of the score. He excised some passages and changed the orchestration by heavily reinforcing many of the lines. Because of the interrelationships of the movements, he toyed for a while with the title "Symphonic Fantasy," but settled instead on calling the first published version *Introduction, Allegro, Romanze, Scherzo and Finale, in One Movement*. He wanted to indicate by this cumbersome title that this composition was a new approach to the problem of form, in which several moods or movements were collected into a single long arch of music. He insisted that there be only momentary pauses between movements, and he even connected the third movement directly to the finale, as had Beethoven in his Fifth Symphony. Schumann strengthened the relationships among the movements by transforming in each a "motto" phrase heard at the outset of the Symphony, as well as interchanging some thematic material among the movements. The specifics of the structure make a revealing study in the adaptation of Classical forms to Romantic expressive needs.

The *Introduction* is somber and slow-moving, with the "motto" (a half-dozen scale notes turning around a central pitch) presented immediately in the second violins. The tempo quickens and the *Allegro* begins with a bounding theme for violins and high woodwinds that encompasses the "motto." The movement continues, passionate and eloquent, with the bounding main theme almost constantly in evidence. Hardly before the recapitulation has begun, it is abruptly truncated to make way for the wistful *Romanze*, based on a haunting tune sung by the oboe. Following a lovely, limpid section marked by shimmering triplet figures in the solo violin, the oboe melody returns briefly but stops on an inconclusive

harmony which resolves only as the tempestuous *Scherzo* begins. The gentle central trio recalls the *Romanze*. With no break, the hushed expectancy that began the Symphony returns, and here serves to usher in the *Finale*. The bounding main theme of the opening movement reappears, as do other musical ideas previously encountered. There is an invigorating rhythmic energy about this closing movement that carries the music forward and gives a sense of arrival, as though the *Finale* were the goal of all that had preceded it. (It is, of course.) As if the exuberant mood that began this movement were insufficient to cap the structure, the tempo in the closing pages twice is increased twice to provide a thrilling final climax to this grand Symphony.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda