

*Schumann's Virtuosity: Criticism, Composition, and Performance in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, by Alexander Stefaniak. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016. x, 296 pp.

Recent years have seen virtuosity thrive as a topical focus in nineteenth-century music studies. Reflecting music scholars' increasing attention to issues of performance and performers—perhaps influenced by the historically informed performance practice movement, which has of late been training its lens on the Romantic era—discussions of virtuosity have emerged in monographs, journal articles, dissertations and theses, and conference programs over the past decade and a half. Alexander Stefaniak's monograph participates in this development.<sup>1</sup> In focusing on the concept of virtuosity in Robert Schumann's music, Stefaniak tackles an issue that has long lain cloaked in near silence among scholars who specialize in this composer's works. Such reticence may stem from the perception that virtuosity, "in its most basic definition . . . an extraordinary display of physical skill from the performer—velocity, power, facility, even the ability to invent and execute radically new sounds" (p. 2), has not been widely acknowledged as a central concern in Schumann's compositional style as it has been in those of Franz Liszt and Niccolò Paganini. Additionally, the dyadic image of composer-performer (or vice versa) associated with virtuosity in the nineteenth century did not apply to Schumann, whose pianistic aspirations were short-lived. This is not to say that his music makes fewer demands technically. Any performer who has attempted his major solo works would attest to this. But the same performer is likely to assert that the physical challenges involved in playing Schumann's music seem of a distinct order.<sup>2</sup> That said, there is evidence that Schumann grappled with contemporaneous notions of virtuosity in diverse capacities—as an aspiring pianist, a music critic, a composer, and a collaborator of virtuoso performers. Drawing upon an array of primary and secondary sources, Stefaniak traces Schumann's engagement in what the author calls "the virtuosity discourse: a lively, at times acrimonious discussion in which musicians and writers debated the imagined distinctions between transcendent and superficial virtuosity" (p. 2).

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which focuses on piano works from the 1830s. This section is more than twice the length of the

1. Earlier studies centered on single composers include Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Mai Kawabata, *Paganini: The "Demonic" Virtuoso* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2013).

2. As Roland Barthes insightfully put it, marrying kinetics to aesthetics, Schumann's music conjures up "[movements] ceaselessly 'mutant,'" a body that "does not *stay in place*," and "a pulsional body": Roland Barthes, "Loving Schumann" and "Rasch," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 293–98, 299–312, here 295, 300 (Barthes's emphasis).

second, which explores how Schumann's notion of virtuosity relates to the culture of the work concept.<sup>3</sup> An introduction and epilogue round off the six chapters. Stefaniak explains the substance of each in his prefatory overview. The four chapters in part 1 cover, respectively, Schumann's critical attitude toward what he deemed frivolously virtuosic works and the unthinking enjoyment that they elicited; his identification of alternative notions ("poetic" virtuosity); how this idea manifested in his circle of supporters, notably among cultivated female amateurs; and the composer's move to inflect his concept with the sublime. In part 2, Stefaniak locates other types of virtuosity in works that Schumann composed with Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim in mind, via close appraisal of several late works for soloist and orchestra.

The strengths of Stefaniak's work are many. This reviewer especially enjoyed his exegesis of Schumann's writings in part 1. By probing virtuoso compositions that Schumann reviewed as a critic, Stefaniak reminds us that Schumann had a vast, intimate knowledge of the music about which he wrote, much of which is little known today.<sup>4</sup> The reader is treated to discussions of, among others, Johann Nepomuk Hummel's *Études*, op. 125, and his Piano Concerto no. 2 in A Minor, op. 85; Henri Herz's *La Violette* Variations, op. 48; Frédéric Kalkbrenner's *La straniera* Variations, op. 123; Theodore Döhler's *Anna Bolena* Variations, op. 17; Ferdinand Hiller's *Études*, op. 15; Ignaz Moscheles's *Études* op. 95 and his Piano Trio, op. 84; and Julius Benedict's *La straniera* Variations, op. 16. Ludwig Schuncke, a virtuoso pianist who died tragically young, dedicated his Piano Sonata, op. 3, to his confidant Schumann. Sigismund Thalberg's works are particularly well represented on this list of bravura showpieces (for example, his Caprice op. 15, *Norma* Fantasy and Variations, op. 12, and *Deux airs russes variés*, op. 17). Laudably, Stefaniak calls into service valuable Schumann sources that we are only gradually coming to know: *Dichtergarten*, *Mottosammlung*, and primary information included in the editorial texts of the ongoing *Robert Schumann: Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*. This reviewer also appreciated the considerable musicality evident in many of Stefaniak's observations, such as the "mood swing" into "qualities of repose, control, and solidity" in the first movement of the Piano Concerto, op. 54 (p. 188). Stefaniak's fresh, vigorous writing with its occasional touches of informality makes for agreeable reading and is likely highly effective in pedagogical situations. In taking apart what virtuosity meant to Schumann and postulating the qualifying labels "poetic," "sublime," and "serious,"

3. The book is a revised version of Stefaniak's "'Poetic Virtuosity': Robert Schumann as a Critic and Composer of Virtuoso Instrumental Music" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2012).

4. In this sense Stefaniak follows and extends Leon Plantinga's approach in *Schumann as Critic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967).

Stefaniak fingers different nuances of the concept in nineteenth-century Germany, expanding the basic definition given at the beginning of this review.

Part 2 highlights music composed between the mid-1840s and early 1850s. The richly informative veins of music criticism that Stefaniak mined for opinions about virtuosity in part 1 give way to reviews that “only . . . faintly” support the author’s contentions, as he himself admits (p. 196). Shifting the weight of the evidence to the score instead, Stefaniak interprets music Schumann wrote for Clara and Joachim in light of music-political currents at mid-century, contending that virtuosity took on a different cast as various classicizing ideals (historicism, *Werktreue*, canon formation, quasi-religious imagery) gained traction in concert culture. The works discussed include the Piano Concerto (1845), the Introduction and Allegro Appassionato, op. 92 (1849), and the Introduction and Concert Allegro, op. 134 (1853), for Clara; and for Joachim, the Phantasie, op. 131, and the Violin Concerto (both composed in 1853). Stefaniak highlights how, in these musically and physically exacting compositions, Schumann blended signifiers of convention with glittering displays in ways that buttressed the composer’s and performers’ images as self-appointed gatekeepers of the emerging canon. While Stefaniak makes interesting and informed points, firsthand evidence about the reception of the pyrotechnics in these works (what the author calls “serious virtuosity,” p. 198) would render his claims more compelling. Adding a thorough consideration of Schumann’s propensity for mixing genres (a strategy developed by the composer in his late music) would certainly move the argument in other, potentially intriguing directions. Chapter 6 includes extended commentary on the so-called *style hongrois* in the Phantasie, op. 131 (and other works by Schumann). But did music critics identify, say, *hallgató* style in opus 131’s introduction? For those of us who strain to hear exoticism in Schumann’s music, even in pieces identified as having “Hungarian-Gypsy” titles, recent scholarship about the historical precursors of this apparent paradox might be reassuring.<sup>5</sup>

Methodologically speaking, Stefaniak sticks to tried-and-true techniques in analyzing virtuosity as a stylistic-aesthetic category, although it should be noted that the primary sources he cites also offer fertile possibilities for considering corporeal aspects of virtuosity—here, embodiment theories come to mind. Specific terms that feature prominently in his arguments (“poetic virtuosity,” for instance) are treated flexibly, rather than being pinned down. While Stefaniak recognizes the roles of gender in music culture and gendered language in music criticism, these could have received more nuanced

5. See, for example, Catherine Mayes, “Eastern European National Music as Concept and Commodity at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century,” *Music and Letters* 95, no. 1 (February 2014): 70–91. Locke argues for broadening definitions of “exoticism” in Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

consideration. (Kudos to him, however, for bringing to our attention cultivated women amateurs who supported Schumann's ideas.) Arguably, the book's title—which seems to assume that “Schumann” would be understood as referring to Robert—is anachronistic by today's standards (the cover illustration notwithstanding). Surprisingly for a study that relies heavily on historical reviews, Stefaniak's readings of a range of writers—Ludwig Rellstab, Ignaz von Seyfried, Carl Ferdinand Becker, Ernst Ortlepp, Eduard Hanslick, Ludwig Bischoff—come with scant information about their respective backgrounds, musical proclivities, ideological persuasions, motivations, and/or propensity for repeating ideas and opinions in reviews published prior to their own.<sup>6</sup> (Gottfried Fink is given the most attention in these terms.) Culturally and politically, the critics' attitudes and writings might also reflect considerable regional variations; these factors are given hardly any attention.

This reviewer would have found it useful if Stefaniak had situated Schumann's views about virtuosity among thinkers of his day. How, for example, did the composer's stance and language choices compare with A. B. Marx's assessment of Paganini (1829),<sup>7</sup> early nineteenth-century writings that probed Paganini's skills, and definitions of virtuosity in contemporary encyclopedias?<sup>8</sup> Missing, too, are references to established work on themes and topics scattered across the book: Schumann's reception of Beethoven, the Schumann couple's conflicted artistic relationship, Robert's practices with music copyists, the variegated sources of his aesthetics and his espousal of key characteristics, gendered music criticism, and Schumann's interest in legacy creation in his later years.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately and inconveniently, texts

6. For instance, in a recent article Stefaniak points out that Viennese critic Leopold Zellner “consciously trop[ed]” an essay about Clara Wieck by Franz Liszt: Alexander Stefaniak, “Clara Schumann and the Imagined Revelation of Musical Works,” *Music and Letters* 99, no. 2 (May 2018): 194–223, here 214.

7. Adolf Bernhard Marx, “4. Berichte, ‘Paganini,’” *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 6, no. 16 (1829): 125–26.

8. See, for example, Carl Guhr, *Ueber Paganini's Kunst die Violine zu spielen* (Mainz: Schott, 1830), and Johann Georg Krünitz, *Oekonomische Encyklopädie, oder allgemeines System der Staats-, Stadt-, Haus- u. Landwirthschaft, in alphabetischer Ordnung*, 242 vols. (Berlin: Pauli, 1773–1858), s.v. “Virtuos.”

9. See, respectively, Bodo Bischoff, *Monument für Beethoven: Die Entwicklung der Beethoven-Rezeption Robert Schumanns* (Köln-Rheinkassel: C. Dohr, 1994); Beatrix Borchard, *Clara Wieck und Robert Schumann: Bedingungen künstlerischer Arbeit in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Kassel: Furore-Verlag, 1992); Anette Müller, *Komponist und Kopist: Notenschreiber im Dienste Robert Schumanns* (Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York: Georg Olms, 2010); Edward A. Lippman, “Theory and Practice in Schumann's Aesthetics,” this *Journal* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1964): 310–45; Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (Vienna: J. V. Degen, 1806); Katharine Ellis, “Female Pianists and Their Male Critics in Nineteenth-Century Paris,” this *Journal* 50, nos. 2–3 (Summer–Autumn 1997): 353–85; and Gerd Nauhaus, “Rückkehr zum Wort: Schumanns späte literarische Arbeiten,” in *Der späte Schumann*, ed. Ulrich Tadday, Musik-Konzepte Sonderband, Neue Folge (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2006), 201–12.

in languages other than English appear only in translation (perhaps the publisher's decision). Among various copyediting slips, one warrants emendation here: the last name of prominent Schumann scholar F. (Friedrich) Gustav Jansen (1831–1910), repeatedly referred to in the book as “Jensen” (probably a confusion with the American musicologist Eric Frederick Jensen, also a Schumann specialist). Queries and quibbles aside, Stefaniak's book is commendable as a rational, appealing introduction to an important aspect of nineteenth-century music praxis as explored and articulated by a major composer and leader of the early Romantic movement.

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*Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry*, by Sandra Jean Graham. Music in American Life. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018. xvi, 330 pp.

The opening chapters of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) attribute uncanny documentary power to spirituals. “I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do,” wrote Douglass, who substantiated these horrors through his gruesome description of the sadistic torture of his Aunt Hester by their master. “It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.” But where the written word proved inarticulate, slave songs bore stirring witness. “If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery,” Douglass advised listeners, “let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,—and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because ‘there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.’”<sup>1</sup>

Douglass hoped to mobilize an abolitionist hermeneutics of singing by enslaved African Americans. Still, it is worth registering how extraordinarily freighted with significance this music was in his account. Though it picks up the story two decades later, Sandra Graham's *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* also spotlights the meanings, contingencies, and interracial transactions arising from performances of the black religious folksongs known as spirituals. Graham is less concerned with a cultural politics of this repertoire than with its racial economy, chronicling how spirituals became the “signature song” within black-identified commercial entertainment during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (p. 249). Her period of focus is well chosen. If Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* studies representations of blackness on the antebellum minstrel stage, and such scholars as Karen

1. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 50–51, 57–58.