

Schumann (1810-56) Études Symphoniques Op.13

Based on a theme by Baron von Fricken, (the guardian of Ernestine with whom Schumann was then betrothed) the *Études Symphoniques* were begun in 1834 originally as a set of twelve variations. By 1837 and the first publication, this set had undergone several regroupings and titles. As usual, with his poetic conception of *Florestan and Eusebius*, the dark and light side of his own personality, Schumann was incorporating several different concepts within one composition. With the reference to a '*symphonic*' element in the composition, there was the added problem that some of the variations were simply études which bore little relation to the original theme; also that the final variation was based on a different theme(!) '*Du stolzes England freue dich*'.

The first published order then was:

- Theme - *Andante*
- Etude 1 (Variation 1) - *Un poco più vivo*
- Etude II (Variation 2) - *Andante*
- Etude III - *Vivace*
- Etude IV (Variation 3) - *Allegro marcato*
- Etude V (Variation 4) - *Scherzando*
- Etude VI (Variation 5) - *Agitato*
- Etude VII (Variation 6) - *Allegro molto*
- Etude VIII (Variation 7) - *Sempre marcatissimo*
- Etude IX - *Presto possibile*
- Etude X (Variation 8) - *Allegro con energia*
- Etude XI (Variation 9) - *Andante espressivo*
- Etude XII (Finale) - *Allegro brillante* (based on Marschner's theme).

In the second edition of the same year, the third and ninth movements were removed creating the model for most performances of today.

This is a young man's work, a reminder that Schumann himself had hoped for a significant career as a concert pianist (before an injury to his hand had put an end to these ambitions). It was inevitable too that he should attempt something significantly virtuosic: in 1830 he had heard for the first time, the dazzling technical display of the violinist Niccolò Paganini; a few years later the Op.10 Études of Chopin appeared in publication, which broke all technical restraint while achieving great beauty and integrity of expression. Schumann's interest in virtuosity was to bring it in line with his own deep musical preoccupations. The element of the *symphonic* provides much of the technical inspiration as if the pianist was attempting a transcription of a piece far beyond the normal range of a piano! Even the opening Theme is excessively awkward in its over-extended chords and inner voices, this 'challenge' to the performer continuing throughout as Schumann attempts evermore orchestral effects, even dynamo-like rhythmic structures leading relentlessly from one variation to another. (Surely it is *Eusebius* who finally dominates the work!) However this is a musician's virtuosity in which musical excitement is completely embedded in the technical demands; more than a display of ability, the pianist draws on vast reserves in order to disguise the physical awkwardness and produce a seamless flow of '*symphonic*' music.