

# Irony and Mechanics in Schumann's Toccata, Op. 7

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STEFANIA NEONATO

*Again the old dream came to me:*

*A night in May — as ever*

*We sat beneath the linden tree*

*And swore to be true forever.*

*We vowed and kissed, again and yet*

*Again, as love waxed blinder;*

*And making sure I'd never forget*

*You bit my hand as reminder.*

*O love, with charms that sting and cut,*

*O love, with eyes so inviting!*

*The vows were quite in order, but*

*We could do without the biting.*

Heinrich Heine<sup>1</sup>

## Prologue

**I**F WE AGREE THAT GOOD performances may depart, even consistently, from the composer's original notation, we will all agree that György Cziffra's performance of Schumann's *Toccata*, op. 7 is one of the most exciting.<sup>2</sup> Cziffra plays the piece's acrobatic leaps and daredevil octaves at dizzying speed. His

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<sup>1</sup> "Mir träumte wieder der alte Traum: / Es war eine Nacht im Maie, / Wir saßen unter dem Lindenbaum, / Und schwuren uns ewige Treue. / Das war ein Schwören und Schwören auf's Neu', / Ein Kichern, ein Kosen, ein Küssen; / Daß ich gedenk des Schwures sey, / Hast du in die Hand mich gebissen. / O Liebchen mit den Aeuglein klar! / O Liebchen schön und bissig! / Das Schwören in der Ordnung war, / Das Beißen war überflüssig." Heinrich Heine, *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, in *Buch der Lieder*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1839), 150. Translation from *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: A Modern English Version*, by Hal Draper (Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel, 1982), 69.

<sup>2</sup> The video is accessible on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NncHj0BKCps> (accessed 22 November 2010).

brilliant and heroic finale signals the performer's triumph over such technical hazards, and we rejoice, exalted, with him. However, there is no trace in his performance of the *Toccata's* rhythmic complexity, not even the syncopations that are undoubtedly at the music's core. All counter-rhythms are gone, and polyphonic variety is missing: compressed by Cziffra's all-powerful hands into a homogenous and implacably regular musical unfolding. In the coda, which provides these pianistic flights with an anti-climactic and detached finale, Cziffra continues to affirm virtuosity over materiality, success over technical difficulties: the final *accelerando* into *Più mosso* is imperceptible because the execution is already too fast.

Cziffra's performance thus enacts the triumph of one ideal of mid-nineteenth-century music — pianistic virtuosity — over another, the hallowed original text. These two ideals have existed in frequent opposition since Schumann's day, and few pieces enact this tension more thoroughly than his *Toccata*. Indeed, Cziffra's performance participates in a tradition that has existed since the work's original publication in 1834. Anton Töpken, one of Schumann's friends in Heidelberg, reported that Schumann played the *Toccata* at a "comfortable" speed — *Allegro comodo* — and complained about the rushed tempi taken by other performers.<sup>3</sup> Impressive though Cziffra's performance may be, then — the video continues to draw effusive praise from his YouTube audience — it is difficult to escape the feeling that something essential is thereby lost. His breakneck finale in particular seems to enforce a resolution of elements that might more productively be left in tension: a resolution which is entirely absent in the score. The nature of this essential tension between poetics and mechanics, and how its meanings might be located within the music, will be the subject of our inquiries in the pages to come. We will follow Schumann's *Toccata*, op. 7 through its early incarnations as a pianistic exercise, and then a virtuoso showpiece, and finally — I will argue — a reflection on the tensions between mechanics and meaning.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Schumann spielte die 'Toccata' immer nur Allegro comodo, wie Töpken sagte; unsere heutigen virtuosen überstürzen häufig das Tempo." Gustav Jansen, *Die Davidsbündler: aus Robert Schumanns Sturm- und Drangperiode* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1904), 69. Quoted in Michael J. Luebbe, "Robert Schumann's *Exercice pour le Piano-forte*," in *Schumanniana Nova, Festschrift Gerd Nauhaus zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Gerd Nauhaus, Bernhard R. Appel, Ute Bär, and Matthias Wendt (Sinzig: Studio, 2002), 432-33.

<sup>4</sup> This essay is a version of part of my recently-completed DMA dissertation "Mechanical Virtuosity at the Turn of the 19th Century: Towards the Definition of a Genre" (Cornell University, 2011).

## Schumann and the Mechanics of Virtuosity

Cziffra was not the first pianist to seek a new ending for the *Toccata*. This honor may go to Friedrich Wieck, Clara's father and Schumann's piano teacher during the years 1829 to 1832. Thus Henriette Voigt wrote to her husband in 1834:

[Schumann] told me that Wieck has tormented him to make him change the ending of the *Toccata*, because his daughter would play it in the next concert on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September.... The end appears to be not brilliant enough — what an insanity.<sup>5</sup>

Wieck's disapproval may provide us with a first window into the *Toccata*: the piece emerged from Schumann's uneasy years under the tutelage of this eminent pedagogue, who — at least in Schumann's telling — espoused an athletic, showy pianism developed through mechanical exercises, endlessly repeated. The composer's early desire to become a piano virtuoso, his self-inflicted injuries and eventual abandonment of a performance career in favor of literary and compositional endeavors are all too well known to merit rehearsal here.<sup>6</sup> We might, though, benefit from a brief examination of what exactly constituted a pianistic education around 1830: the figurations that lay beneath those young hands. Any young musician who sought to become a professional pianist had to undergo strict physical training consisting of finger exercises and etudes, brilliant variations, virtuosic transcriptions, and the like. The first decades of the nineteenth century witnessed an endless stream of pieces whose technical formulae had been invented by pedagogues and composers expressly to showcase and develop new piano techniques. In February 1829, the young Schumann was excited by the appearance of a technique book from one of the era's most famous pianists, Johann Nepomuk Hummel; he practiced the finger exercises from the *Klavierschule* and applied them to the composer's larger works such as the Sonata in F-sharp minor, op. 81, and the Concerto in A minor.

Techniques such as those taught in Hummel's *Klavierschule* were seen as the necessary precursors to musical mastery, and it was the duty of the pedagogue to

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<sup>5</sup> “[Schumann] sagte mir, dass ihn Wieck gequält habe, er soll den Schluss der *Toccata* ändern, da seine Tochter im nächsten Konzert 11. September ... spielen würde, es wäre am Ende nicht brilliant genug — welche Tollheit.” Quoted in Luebbe, “Robert Schumann's *Exercice*,” 434.

<sup>6</sup> On Schumann's frustrations at the piano, see Claudia Macdonald's brilliant and thorough article “Schumann's Piano Practice: Technical Mastery and Artistic Ideal,” *Journal of Musicology* 19/4 (Autumn 2002): 527–63.

ensure that the student pianist acquired the full gamut, from chains of octaves, to parallel thirds and sixths, to lightning-fast leaps. Wieck tried repeatedly to teach Schumann to “conquer ... mechanics,” writing, “For Robert the greatest difficulty lies in the quiet, cold, thoughtful and persistent conquering of mechanics as the first element of all piano playing.” Indeed, Wieck seems to have found in Schumann a peculiarly frustrating pupil, both inclined to inflate the importance of mechanics, and disinclined to learn them:

Robert very wrongly supposes ‘that the whole of piano playing consists of pure mechanics’; what a one-sided judgment! ... I confess frankly that when, after difficult struggles and disagreements on his part, I was successful ... in convincing him of the importance of a pure, precise, equal, clear and rhythmically marked and elegant touch, by the next lesson it had often borne little fruit — and I began ... again to take up the old theme and again and again to explain the difference with respect to music studied with me, etc. etc. and forcibly to persevere in my point.<sup>7</sup>

It is not difficult to find evidence of this frustration within Robert’s own writings. He originally placed considerable trust in Wieck’s didactic system writing to his mother in 1830:

I’m sure that with application and patience, and under a good teacher, within six years I will be able to compete with any pianist, since the whole of piano playing consists of pure mechanics and execution.<sup>8</sup>

Schumann reassured his mother that, should he remain diligent, “in three or four years I hope to be as far along as Moscheles.”<sup>9</sup> At other times, though, these studies threw him into the gloomiest desperation: “music, you are disgusting to me and odious to death.”<sup>10</sup> Eventually, the disjunction between Schumann’s ideal projection and its practical realization led him to identify a threefold process of musical learning: first came the infatuation with a piece, then the mastery of its mechanics, and finally the union between the two.

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from Wieck to Christiane Schumann of 9 August 1830. Quoted in Macdonald, “Schumann’s Piano Practice,” 533.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Macdonald, “Schumann’s Piano Practice,” 534.

<sup>9</sup> “Es geht mir manchmal recht und schön: bin fleißig und mache prächtige Fortschritte: in drei bis vier Jahren hoff ich so weit wie Moscheles zu sein.” Letter of 15 December 1830, Robert Schumann, *Schlage nur eine Weltsaite an: Briefe 1828-1855*, ed. Karin Sousa (Frankfurt: Insel, 2006), 32 (hereafter *Briefe*). Ignaz Moscheles was one of the most famous composer-virtuosos of the day.

<sup>10</sup> *Tagebuch* entry of 5 June 1831. Quoted in Macdonald, “Schumann’s Piano Practice,” 539.

It seems as if at first the mere life, fresh spirit and charm elevate the mechanics above themselves; later, when the former fades and the latter weakens, only the dry, cold keys remain for a long time. But shouldn't the time come when the piece plays [the spirit]? It ought to be complete. To be sure, I have an ideal, and it is also attainable. If I continue like this I won't be afraid.<sup>11</sup>

In Schumann's construction of pianistic learning, then, a piece's musical essence is made metaphysical — indeed, into a “spirit” — precisely by eluding the performer's fingers; but the technically able performer could effect an animation, reuniting musical body and spirit. Unfortunately, Schumann was able to achieve this final union very rarely indeed: “What should I say regarding the third stage, where spirit and form, mechanics and fantasy flow into one another, that it is embodied music? Let me see your paradise!”<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, then, Schumann came to lose faith in Wieck's method. In a letter to Johann Nepomuk Hummel from 1831, Schumann criticized Wieck's “Paganini-style” musical ideals and attributed his own resistance to these ideals to an independent nature:

Every movement was to be learnt page for page conscientiously, letting me play the good and the bad in colorful disorder; [Wieck] worried more about touch and fingering, because everything had to be executed wittingly and in Paganini-style, so that I could not play fast enough anymore. My teacher wanted me to improve through a certain scrupulous, quickly mechanical and worked-out way of playing; I see also that his method works better with his daughter who shows great promise in this respect, rather than me as I don't have confidence in such a liberal treatment.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Es scheint, als ob in der ersten das bloße Leben u. der frische Geist u. Reiz die Mechanik über sich selbst hinaushöbe; später wo dieser verlischt u. jener schwächer wird, bleibt dann Zeit lange die trokne, kalte Taste; aber sollte dann nicht die Zeit kommen, wo dann das Stük ihn spielt, so ganz müßte es seyn. Ich habe wohl ein Ideal u. es ist auch zu erreichen. Fahr' ich so fort, so zittre ich nicht.” Robert Schumann, *Tagebücher*, vol. 1 [1827-1838], ed. Georg Eismann (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1971): 333. Quoted (with a slightly different translation) in Macdonald, “Schumann's Piano Practice,” 537.

<sup>12</sup> “Was soll ich aber von der dritten sagen, wo Geist u. Form, Mechanik u. Fantasie ineinander fließen, daß man leibhafte Musick ist? Laß mich deine Paradiese zu sehen!” Schumann, *Tagebücher* I: 354.

<sup>13</sup> “Statt daß sonst jeder Ton wie auf die Goldwage gelegt, jeder Satz Seite für Seite auf das Gewissenhafteste studiert ward, ließ er mich jetzt Gutes und Schlechtes bunt durcheinander spielen, bekümmerte sich weder um Anschlag, noch Applikatur — da sollte alles geistreich und Paganinisch vorgetragen werden, da konnt' ich nicht lebhaft und huschelg [?] genug spielen. Mein Lehrer wollte mich dadurch über ein gewisses ängstliches, fast mechanisches und herausstudiertes Spiel heben; ich sah auch, daß seine Methode bei seiner Tochter, die in der

Schumann's piano odyssey lasted slightly longer than three years, from 1829 to 1832, the years of the genesis of the *Toccata*. These years saw the gradual worsening of the injuries to his hands, and his progressive detachment from Wieck's ideal of pianism.<sup>14</sup>

However rooted in his own pianistic failure, Schumann's aversion to pure mechanics had distinguished literary precedents. David Leslie Blasius has described such early nineteenth-century pianism as a process of Frankensteinian reconstitution, by which pre-fabricated, musically inert parts are assembled into an animated but uncanny musical whole. The process calls to mind Hoffmann's tale *Der Sandmann*: the hero Nathaniel falls in love with Olympia, seemingly the embodiment of a perfect woman, but in reality an automaton. Nathaniel's friend Siegmund tries here to open his eyes:

She seems ... strangely stiff and soulless. Her figure is symmetrical, and so is her face.... Her step is peculiarly measured; all of her movements seem to stem from some kind of clockwork. Her playing and her singing are unpleasantly perfect, being as lifeless as a music box; it is the same with her dancing.... She seems to be playing the part of a human being, and it is as if there really were something hidden behind all of this.<sup>15</sup>

The eighteenth-century interest in automata and music boxes saw something of a reversal following the turn of the nineteenth century. While inventors had once sought to humanize the machine — a fact confirmed by the series of automata playing and moving as humans<sup>16</sup> — the early nineteenth century saw increasing attempts to automate the human.<sup>17</sup> As we will see, the compositional

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Tat Außergewöhnliches verspricht, besser anschlagen mußte als bei mir, da ich eine so freie Behandlung noch nicht zutrauen durfte." Letter of 20 August 1831, Schumann, *Briefe*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> These injuries may have been owing to his experiments with his own fingers and what he called *Cigarren mechanik*, an invention of conical screws to improve the fingers' span; see Macdonald, "Schumann's Piano Practice," 558, and Piero Rattalino, "Prefazione," in Robert Schumann, *Gli Scritti Critici*, ed. Antonietta Cerocchi Pozzi, trans. Gabrio Taglietti (Milan: Ricordi Unicopli, 1991), 39.

<sup>15</sup> E.T.A. Hoffmann, "The Sandman," in *Selected Writings of E.T.A. Hoffmann*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Leonard J. Kent and Elizabeth C. Knight (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), I: 161.

<sup>16</sup> I refer the reader to the work of Adelheid Voskuhl: "The Mechanics of Sentiment: Music-playing Automata and the Culture of Affect in Late Eighteenth-Century Europe" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2007), and "Motions and Passions: Music-Playing Automata and the Culture of Affect in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany," in *Genesis Redux: Essays in the History and Philosophy of Artificial Life*, ed. Jessica Riskin, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 293-320.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Paul's complex philosophy should be taken into account again here. With his 1785 satire *Menschen sind Maschinen* der Engel, Jean Paul actually questioned both approaches.

layers of the *Toccata* provide a surprisingly direct reflection of Schumann's progressive detachment from the mechanical ideal. Before we examine the musical texts both within Schumann's Opus 7 and immediately outside it, though, let us dwell a while longer on constructions of detachment within Schumann's literary milieu.

## Schumann and Irony

Near the end of Schumann's above-quoted letter to Hummel of August 1831, detailing the deterioration of his relationship with Wieck, the composer abandoned his plaintive tone in favor of something rather different: "I turn now trustful to the Master; maybe he would grant me for some time the pleasure of his lessons."<sup>18</sup> Schumann seems to adopt irony as a self-protective cloak, a talisman against the sincere appreciation of his own failure. As such, it has distinguished precedents. He had met Heinrich Heine on 8 May 1828 during a stay in Munich, when the poet led the young Schumann around the city. This encounter left a deep mark on the composer.<sup>19</sup> Hoping to win Heine's friendship, Schumann sent him a letter of thanks, along with some of his song settings. Just as Goethe never acknowledged Schubert's settings of his works,

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According to him, humanity was itself a "mechanical creation" of the angels, so that our own *Erde Maschinen* were — exactly as in Plato's myth of the cave — mere copies of the *Himmel Maschinen*. The final passage of the satire deserves full quotation: "The machines of the earth must almost always yield precedence to the machines of the angels, and one does not overestimate the former if one maintains that, just as the beauties of the earth, according to Plato, are mere imprints of the beauties in heaven, [the machines of the earth] are mere imitations and poor copies of the machines which the angels have conceived; this woman-machine for example, the piano, is at most a felicitous copy of those female machines who play the piano and accompany the tones with movements which seem to betray emotion." ("Die Maschinen der Erde müssen fast alzeit den Maschinen der Engel den Vorrang lassen und man thut jenen nicht zu viel, wenn man behauptet, daß sie, so wie die Schönheiten der Erde nach Plato blosse Abdrücke der Schönheiten im Himmel sind, blosse Nachahmungen und schwache Kopien der Maschinen sind, die die Engel erdacht: jenes Frauenzimmer 'Maschine' z.B., das Klavier, ist höchstens eine glückliche Kopie der weiblichen Maschinen, die das Klavier schlagen und die Töne mit Bewegungen begleiten, die offenbar Rührung zu verrathen scheinen.") Jean Paul, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Norbert Miller (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1974), I/II: 1030-31. Translation by Martin Küster.

<sup>18</sup> "An den Meister wend' ich mich nun vertrauensvoll, ob er mir vielleicht eine Zeitlang den Genuß seines Unterrichts gewähren wolle." Letter of 20 August 1831, Schumann, *Briefe*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Schumann wrote in his diary: "Heine – spirited conversation – ironic little man – amiable disguise – walk with him to the Leuchtenbergische Gallerie – Canova's Graces not noble enough." ("Heine – geistreiche Unterhaltung – ironisches Männchen – liebenswürdige Verstellung – Gang mit ihm auf die Leuchtenbergische Gallerie der Sessel Napoleons – die Grazien v. Canova nicht edel genug.") *Tagebücher* I: 64.

Schumann never got an answer from Heine — but the poet remained one of his literary ideals. Schumann appears to have been particularly attracted to the eccentric combination of sarcasm and desperation within Heine's poems.<sup>20</sup> The word *Heinismus* appears frequently in Schumann's writings around 1830 and is generally associated with the concept of "irony."<sup>21</sup>

Schumann's famous statement about learning more counterpoint from a writer — Jean Paul Richter — than from composers counts as an (ironic) polemic against the then-current narrow-minded music-teaching and fashionable musical taste.<sup>22</sup> For Schumann, Jean Paul represented the isolated prophet-poet, who observed the dictates of fashion and the establishment while remaining fundamentally detached from them. In Jean Paul's *Des Luftschiffers Giannozzo Seebuch*, the hero interacts with his fellows only from a distance, travelling in a balloon through different countries; the only kind of communication is enacted by irony and satire with a touch of nostalgia: "on the surface, which flowed endlessly on every side, all the theatres of life played together with pulled up curtains."<sup>23</sup> Giannozzo's gaze is full of criticism and compassion at the same time: "the temple of nature was full of stored quiet colossi but human beings looked very small around them."<sup>24</sup> Like both Jean Paul and Heine, Schumann held that the artist was a "wicked spirit," destined to be isolated.<sup>25</sup> The dichotomy between the ideal and the real in the artist's

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<sup>20</sup> "Bizzarrie in den Heinishen Liedern, jenen brennenden Sarkasmus, jene große Verzweiflung." *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> On the relation between Schumann and Heine, see Friedrich Schnapp, *Heinrich Heine und Robert Schumann* (Hamburg and Berlin: Hoffmann und Campe, 1924). Friedrich Schlegel held irony to be the only possible critical way to create new art and literature. In one of the *Athenäum* fragments he associated irony with the foundations of thinking: "An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the constantly self-engendering interchange of two conflicting thoughts." See John Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York: Schirmer, 1993), 13.

<sup>22</sup> "Kennen Sie nicht Jean Paul, unseren großen Schriftsteller? Von diesem hab' Ich mehr Contrapunkt gelernt als von meinem Musiklehrer." Robert Schumann to Simonin de Sire, 15 March 1839, in *Briefe, Neue Folge*, ed. Friedrich Gustav Jansen (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1886), 109.

<sup>23</sup> "Auf der Fläche, die auf allen Seiten, ins Unendliche hinausfloß, spielten alle verschiedene Theater des Lebens mit aufgezogenen Vorhängen zugleich." Jean Paul, *Werke III: Des Luftschiffers Giannozzo Seebuch*, 959. This brief work is an appendix to Jean Paul's novel *Titan* (1802).

<sup>24</sup> "Der Tempel der Natur war voll ruhiger Kolossen gelagert, aber der Mensch stieg klein und kleinlich auf ihnen herum." *Ibid.*, 982.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Paul writes, "I am certainly a wicked spirit" ("Ich bin gewiß ein böser Geist"). *Ibid.*, 966. According to Eichendorff, Heine made extensive use of the "little devil of irony" in many of his



mind was never to be solved and no compromise was considered possible.<sup>26</sup> Schumann wrote in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1835:

If we wanted to fight against the entire direction of the *Zeitgeist*, which tolerates a *Dies Irae* as Burlesque, then we should have repeated what has long been written against Byron, Heine, Victor Hugo, Grabbe and the like. For some moments in eternity, poetry has set before itself the mask of irony to conceal its pained appearance; perhaps once a friendly hand will untie it and, temporarily, will transform its wild tears into pearls.<sup>27</sup>

For Schumann, irony is thus the artist's defense against philistine ideology and art forms: a mask that would be removed only when it was no longer needed.<sup>28</sup> The irreconcilability of the ideal and the real is mirrored within many other dichotomies typical of Romantic aesthetics: for instance, between spirit and materiality; poetry and prose; naïveté and sentimentality.<sup>29</sup> Underlying

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poems, including that given at the beginning of this paper. Significantly, Jean Paul entitled a collection of his juvenile satires *Teufels Papiere* ("The Devil's Papers").

<sup>26</sup> According to Otto Frauke, "How Jean Paul describes the Humorist becomes a typical characteristic of the modern artists and for Schumann at the same time, namely the negative relationship between the Humorist and the present time: due to his reflective consciousness, the discrepancy between the ideal and the real becomes an existential problem for the Humorist. His uncompromising view of the present leads him to isolation." ("Was den Humoristen Jean Paul auszeichnet, wird somit zugleich für Schumann Charakteristik des modernen Künstlers bezeichnend, der negative Bezug des Humoristen nämlich zur Gegenwart: Aufgrund seines reflektierenden Bewußtsein ist dem Humoristen die Diskrepanz zwischen Ideal und Wirklichkeit zum existentiellen Problem geworden. Seine kompromißlose Sicht der Gegenwart führt ihn in die Isolation.") Frauke, *Robert Schumann als Jean Paul-Leser* (Frankfurt: Haag & Herchen, 1984), 167.

<sup>27</sup> "Wollte man gegen die ganze Richtung des Zeitgeistes, der ein *Dies Irae* als Burlesque duldet, ankämpfen, so müßte man wiederholen, was seit langen Jahren gegen Byron, Heine, Victor Hugo, Grabbe und ähnliche geschrieben und geredet worden. Die Poesie hat, auf einige Augenblicke in der Ewigkeit, die Maske der Ironie vorgesetzt, um ihr Schmerzengesicht nicht sehen zu lassen; vielleicht daß eine freundliche Hand sie einmal abbinden wird und daß sich einstweilen die wilden Thränen zu Perlen umgewandelt haben." Robert Schumann, "Orchester. Hector Berlioz, *Episode de la vie d'un Artiste etc.*," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 3/13 (14 August 1835), 52.

<sup>28</sup> According to Bernhard Appel, the distinction between "romantic humor" and "romantic irony" is difficult to define and to maintain. See Appel, "Robert Schumanns Humoreske für Klavier op. 20: zum musikalischen Humor in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Formproblems" (Ph.D. diss., Saarbrücken, 1981), 84. According to Jean Paul, "irony commits a sin when either it shows its bare foolish appearance or its mere serious mask" ("Die Ironie sündigt gleich sehr, wenn sie das bloße thörichte Gesicht oder wenn sie die bloße ernste Maske darüber zeigt"). Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, revised 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1813), 313.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Schiller's *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795) was a landmark of literary

these is the fundamental Kantian opposition between the “noumenal” and “phenomenal” (“essence” and “appearance,” “eternity” and “impermanence”).<sup>30</sup> Faced with the impossibility of integrating these opposites, the artist fills in the gaps with magic, fantasy and enchantment. In Jean Paul’s term, he is the “genius,” *das Genie*.

In his *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (1804), Jean Paul described the difference between “genius” and “talent” in musical terms:

The one-sided talent gives only one sound, like a piano string hit by a hammer; but the genius resembles the string of an Aeolian harp: one and the same produces manifold sounds from manifold winds. In the genius, *all* strengths are in blossom at once; and fantasy is not the flower but the Flower-Goddess, who arranges all the cross-pollinating calyxes in new combinations, like, as it were, a power full of powers.<sup>31</sup>

Schumann added his own idea to this formulation in a brief treatise from June 1828 entitled *Über Genial – Knill – Original – u. andre Itäten*.<sup>32</sup>

The endless charm of the genius in the youth is its rich humanity; the first requirement is originality. Every genius is at the same time original and a

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theory at the turn of the nineteenth century; it suggests that humanity should strive to regain its “naivety.” Schiller, *Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1997), 4-5. Regarding sentimental poetry, he wrote: “The poet, I say, is either nature or he will look for it. The former is the naïve, the latter, the sentimental poet.” (“Der Dichter, sage ich, ist entweder Natur, oder er wird sie suchen, Jenes macht den naiven, diesen den sentimentalischen Dichter.”) *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> On the role of distance in Romanticism and how it “narrows the gap between the phenomenal and noumenal,” see Berthold Hoeckner, “Schumann and Romantic Distance,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50/1 (Spring 1997): 55-132.

<sup>31</sup> “Nur das einseitige Talent gibt wie eine Klaviersaite unter dem Hammerschlage Einen Ton; aber das Genie gleicht einer Windharfen-Saite; eine und dieselbe spielt sich selber zu mannigfachen Tönen vor dem mannigfachem Anwehen. Im Genius stehen *alle* Kräfte auf einmal in Blüte; und die Phantasie ist darin nicht die Blume, sondern die Blumengöttin, welche die zusammenstäubenden Blumenkelche für neue Mischungen ordnet, gleichsam die Kraft voll Kräfte.” Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> There are many German words ending with the suffix “-ität.” One of the most unusual is *Knillität*, which means *Betrunkenheit*, “drunkenness.” *Knillität* formed part of the vocabulary of the nineteenth-century academic fraternities. See Norbert Nail, “Go-in/Go-out – Kontinuität und Wandel in der deutschen Studentensprache des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts. Ein Versuch,” in *Beiträge zu Linguistik und Phonetik: Festschrift für Joachim Göschel*, ed. Angelika Braun (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2001), 135-53. In Schumann’s diaries, when he was a student in Heidelberg and Leipzig, the word *Knillität* appears quite often at the end of the day.

self-educated 'original,' whereas on the other hand not every original person is a genius.<sup>33</sup>

Schumann believed that "every person is an original, with weaker or stronger features. Copies are never like the original itself."<sup>34</sup> For him as for Jean Paul, *Nachahmer* were imitators of the genius's originality: geniuses are characterized by the absence of logic and the subsequent presence of intuition (what Jean Paul calls *Instinkt*).<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, a true genius is capable of effecting an aesthetic union between the sentimental and the humorous; predictably, here Jean Paul was first on a list that also included Goethe, Hoffmann, Beethoven, Schubert, and — surprisingly — Moscheles.<sup>36</sup> For Schumann, Jean Paul was able to combine three important elements: *Gemüth* (feeling), *Humor* (humor) and *Witz* (wit).<sup>37</sup> The latter two were cornerstones of Romantic aesthetics, almost forgotten today in the shadow of *Gemüth*. Humor entails the combination of contrasts, an artful proximity between the low and the high, the infinitely big and the infinitely small. Wit represents the peculiar faculty of perceiving these contrasts through intuition, or what John Daverio has called "an immediate transformation of a seemingly random juxtaposition of antithetical terms into a meaningful configuration."<sup>38</sup>

Jean Paul's *Vorschule* outlined a clear division between the "inner" and the "outer":

Now, here the dispute as to whether poetry requires subject matter, or rules by form alone is easily solved. In any case, there is an *external mechanical* matter,

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<sup>33</sup> "Der unendliche Reiz der Genialität bey Jünglingen ist jene reiche Menschlichkeit; das erste Erforderniß Originalität. Jeder Geniale ist zugleich originell u. an sich selbst gebildetes Original, wenn auch auf den andern Seite jeder originelle nicht genial ist." Frauke, *Robert Schumann als Jean Paul-Leser*, 111.

<sup>34</sup> "Jeder Mensch ist ein original, bey d. einem oder den andern mit schwächeren oder stärkeren Farben. Copien sind niemals wie die Originale selbst." Schumann, *Tagebücher* I: 104.

<sup>35</sup> "Genialität – auf jedem Fall ein sehr genialer Aufsatz, wenigstens unlogisch u. Genialität ist gerade kein Schooßkind der Logik." Ibid., 119.

<sup>36</sup> "So ist die höchste Potenz der Genialität die ästhetisch-schöne Verbindung des Sentimentalen u. Humoristischen, wie wir es oft im Jean Paul, manchmal in Göthe u. selten in Hoffmann, meistens bey Beethoven, Schubert, auch bey Moscheles finden." Frauke, *Robert Schumann als Jean Paul-Leser*, 112.

<sup>37</sup> Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 71.

<sup>38</sup> On "humor" and "wit" see Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 65, 71-72. Schlegel's definition of "understanding," "wit" and "genius" as respectively mechanical, chemical and organic spirit is revelatory; see Daverio, 243n78.

with which reality (both external and psychological) surrounds and often covers us, which, without ennoblement through form, is irrelevant to poetry and not [worth] anything.... But there is something higher than what the day repeats. There is an *internal* matter — as it were, innate spontaneous poetry, which form does not cover, but frame.<sup>39</sup>

Jean Paul's association of the words *mechanisch* and *äußern* is in accord with the aesthetics of his time.<sup>40</sup> That author's quest for an artistic creation whose form originates in content became very much Schumann's own goal; although a thorough investigation of the relation between these two categories is far beyond the scope of this essay, a closer look at the two different versions of Schumann's *Toccata* will give us further insight on the topic.

## The Genesis of the *Toccata*

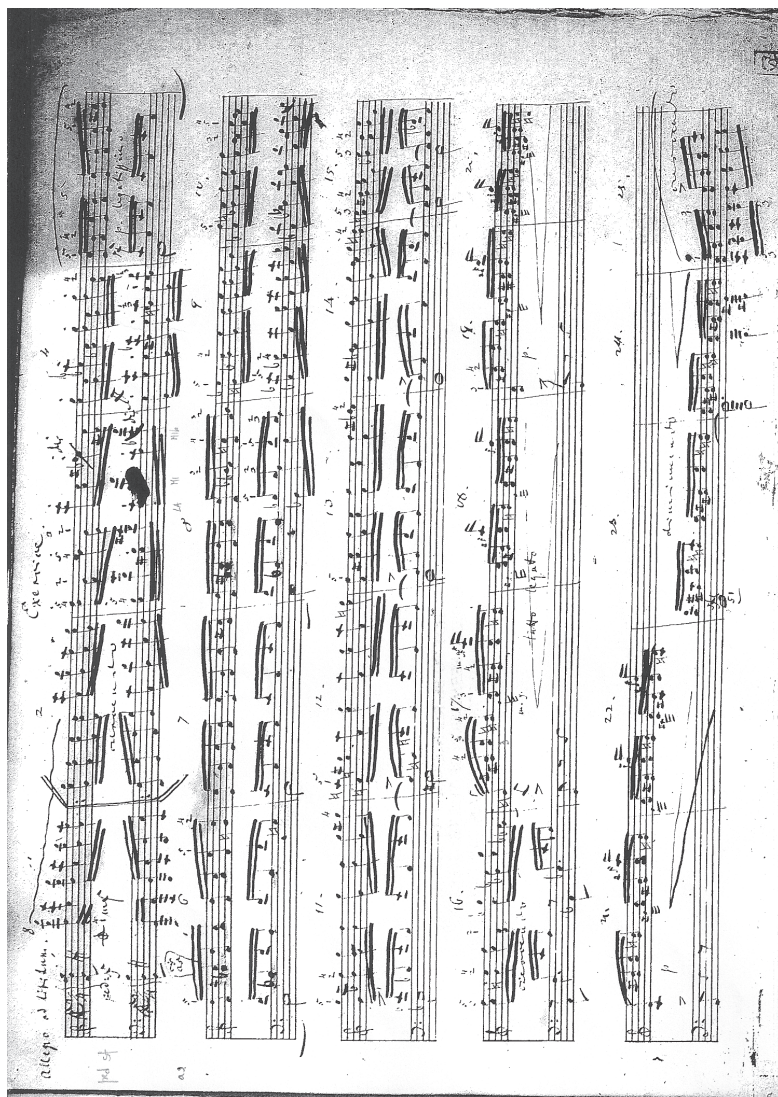
The *Toccata*, op. 7 was published in 1834 following the end of Schumann's pianistic career, but it seems to have begun its life five years earlier.<sup>41</sup> The Pierpont Morgan Library in New York currently houses an autograph manuscript that

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<sup>39</sup> "Hier ist nun der Streit, ob die Poesie Stoff bedürfte oder nur mit Form regiere, leichter zu schließen. Allerdings gibt es einen *äußern mechanischen* Stoff, womit uns die Wirklichkeit (die äußere und die psychologische) umgibt und oft überbaut, welcher, ohne Veredlung durch Form, der Poesie gleichgültig ist und gar nichts ... Aber es gibt ja etwas Höheres, als was der Tag wiederholt. Es gibt einen *innern* Stoff – gleichsam angeborne unwillkürliche Poesie, um welche die Form nicht die Folie, sondern nur die Fassung legt." Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, 81; translation by Martin Küster.

<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Christoph Koch defined "form" as "something accidental that actually has little or no influence on the inner character of a piece of music." ("Etwas Zufälliges ... welches eigentlich wenig oder gar kleinen Einfluß auf den innern Charakter des Tonstücks hat.") Koch, *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition* II (Leipzig: Bohme, 1787; fasc. reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1969), 117. Appel summarized "form" as the "mechanical aspect of an artwork" ("mechanische Seite eines Kunstwerks.") Appel, "Robert Schumann Humoreske für Klavier Opus 20," 42.

<sup>41</sup> A meticulous account of the genesis of the *Toccata*, op. 7, including dates and context, is given in Wolfgang Boetticher, "Robert Schumanns *Toccata* Opus 7 und ihre unveröffentlichte Frühfassung," in *Musik-Edition-Interpretation. Gedenkschrift Günter Henle*, ed. Martin Bente (Munich: Henle, 1980), 100-10; and Boetticher, *Robert Schumanns Klavierwerke: neue biographische und textkritische Untersuchungen* (Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofen, 1976), 10-43. Further research was conducted by Michael J. Luebbe and published in "Robert Schumann's *Exercice*," 423-48. This essay includes a detailed history on the genesis of the *Toccata* and its related pieces; nonetheless, some uncertainty remains regarding several *Exercices* and *Etudes* that Schumann wrote in the years 1829-33. Some of them are lost; diaries, letters and written plans are often unclear or even contradictory. Luebbe also presented his transcription and edition of the autograph of the *Exercice*, from which my examples here are taken. This was the only published edition of this piece until 2010, when Henle issued a double edition with both the *Exercice* and the *Toccata*.



**Figure 1** Robert Schumann, Exercise pour le pianoforte, autograph score, page 1.  
Reproduced with permission.

is similar in form and musical material to the *Toccata* and would appear to date from 1829; the first page of this manuscript is reproduced as Figure 1, while Example 1a (see page 38 below) supplies the first seven measures in modern notation.<sup>42</sup> Contemporary sources allude variously to an *Exercice in Doppelgriffen*, *Exercice fantastique* and *Etude fantastique en double-sons*: all of these titles may refer to this manuscript or to others now lost, as Michael Luebbe has shown.<sup>43</sup> The alternation of double notes or “double stops” that prevails within this manuscript — hereafter referred to as the *Exercice* — was one of the most popular and difficult technical features of early nineteenth-century pianism. The generic titles of “Exercice” and “Etude” (essentially interchangeable for Schumann) suggest a didactic composition of modest musical scope.<sup>44</sup> As such, it was not without precedent for the composer: during these years Schumann compiled a working diary of “exercises” with the most difficult technical formulae. These exercises typically consisted of difficult passages in the repertoire Schumann studied, together with his own version of those same passages.<sup>45</sup> The presence within this manuscript of a rich layer of fingerings and dynamic markings (neither of which are to be found in the *Toccata*) would appear to confirm its pedagogical nature. Furthermore, during

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<sup>42</sup> The fair copy of the manuscript is now in the possession of Mr. Robert O. Lehman and on loan to The Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City. The manuscript was given as a gift from Marie Schumann to Dr. Theodor von Brücke, whence it entered the possession of the pianist Alfred Cortot. Boetticher claims that the *Exercice* may be Schumann's earliest completed solo piano work of substantial length, dating from 1829 or 1830. See Luebbe, “Robert Schumann's *Exercice*,” 423.

<sup>43</sup> The first title is associated with another piece, cited in his diary in entries for 29 April, 22 May, and 4 July of 1832; according to the complete catalog, this is said to be lost. It originally bore opus number 5 and was dedicated first to Mr. J.G. Kuntsch *par son élève* (5 January 1832) and then to Mr. Charles Krägen (July), a pianist and piano teacher whom Schumann met in Dresden in 1832. If this *Exercice* was another version of the *Toccata*, its dedication to two piano teachers would support the underlying pedagogical intent of the piece. Cortot was convinced that Schumann crafted this exercise for his personal use and in particular to practice the independence of third, fourth and fifth fingers.

<sup>44</sup> Proof that Schumann considered these titles to be interchangeable may be located in another composition from the same years, the *Exercices: Étüden in Form freier Variationen über ein Thema von Beethoven*. This is a work that occupied Schumann between 1832 and 1835 and underwent a series of revisions. It bears no opus number. Many of the variations on Beethoven's *Allegretto* from the Seventh Symphony served as a model for the later *12 Etudes Symphoniques*, composed between 1834 and 1837 and published in 1837 as Opus 13.

<sup>45</sup> For an account of many of Chopin's *Variations*, op. 2 on *Don Giovanni*, and also Moscheles' etudes, revisited by Schumann with the addition of voices and rhythms, see Macdonald, “Schumann's Piano Practice,” 552–54.



the years 1832 and 1833, Schumann published two sets entitled *6 Etudes pour le pianoforte d'après les caprices de Paganini*, op. 3, and *6 Etudes de concert d'après des caprices de Paganini*, op. 10. The first collection includes precise fingering and a didactic preface by the author; the Opus 10 collection of “concert etudes” recommended by Schumann for public performance, and originally entitled *Capricen für das Pianoforte, auf dem Grund der Violinstimme von Paganini zu Studien frei bearbeitet*, carries neither fingering nor technical advice.

References to a *Toccata* start as early as 1830 together with *Etüden für Klavier*. Schumann's *Compositionsverzeichnis 1824-43* contains an entry reading “1829-1830. In Heidelberg: Toccata in C begun, but finished and edited in 18[34].”<sup>46</sup> This confirms Schumann's note on his own edition of the piece: “Op. 7. Toccata. Begun in Heidelberg in 1830, finished in Leipzig, in 1833.”<sup>47</sup> An entry in his diary from 1834 relates that “the Toccata appears”;<sup>48</sup> he enclosed the piece in a letter to his mother of 2 July 1834 as “proof of his continuous efforts.”<sup>49</sup>

Despite the temporal and musical proximity of Schumann's *Exercice* to the *Toccata*, any attempt to relate one work to the other must traverse a musicological minefield. In the *Exercice*, the pianist's hands trace a single thematic figuration through tonal areas of exposition, development, and recapitulation: a form that, as Luebbe has noted, may be mapped quite easily onto the structure of the *Toccata*, given the similarity of the musical material.<sup>50</sup> Understood thus, the *Exercice* risks becoming merely an under-developed draft of the *Toccata*, the later work providing a more articulated organization for the material of the *Exercice*: thus the *Exercice*'s arrival on the dominant, beginning at m. 35, becomes a gesture toward a second theme that is fully fledged in the *Toccata*, and so on. The dangers of such an approach are obvious, and Luebbe reminds his readers of the difficulties inherent in positing unambiguous and teleological connections between different musical texts, even ones as proximal as these. Yet while we must be wary of collapsing the meanings of the *Exercice* to that of a mere precursor, we may nonetheless see it as a document in the

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<sup>46</sup> “1829-1830. In Heidelberg: Toccata in C angefangen aber erst 18[34]/fertig gemacht u. herausgegeben.” Quoted in Luebbe, “Robert Schumann's *Exercice*,” 430.

<sup>47</sup> “Op. 7. Toccata. Angefangen in Heidelberg 1830, beendet in Leipzig 1833.” Ibid., 429.

<sup>48</sup> “Die Toccata erschienen.” Ibid., 431.

<sup>49</sup> “Nimm jedoch das beiliegende Stück (Toccata) als Beweis meines fortwährenden Strebens.” Schumann, *Briefe*, 44.

<sup>50</sup> Boetticher discussed “der monothematische Verlauf” in “Robert Schumanns Toccata Opus 7,” 104. Luebbe dubbed it an “enjoyable display piece”; see “Robert Schumann's *Exercice*,” 429.

**Allegro ad libitum**

**Example 1a** Schumann, *Exercice pour le Pianoforte*, beginning

**Allegro comodo**

**Example 1b** Czerny, *Toccata*, op. 92, beginning

*Toccata's* history; something superseded during the process of revision, but a point of departure. Its similar, but not identical, musical material may allow us to connect two points on a biographical map. (A recording of both the Exercise and *Toccata* can be heard on the CD that accompanies this volume, Tracks 7 and 8.)

What are we to make of the adjective *fantastique*? Appended to “exercise” or “etude,” the “fantastic” destabilizes, suggesting a literary inspiration and poetic, bizarre, or enchanted features. Yet such features are peculiarly difficult to trace within this *Exercice* — unless, of course, Schumann considered virtuosity itself to be fantastical. Study-like, the bravura opening of Figure 1





**Example 1c** Onslow, *Toccata*, op. 6, beginning

leads into continuous sixteenth notes, difficult double-note twisters, chromatic successions of chords, chains of octaves, and the requisite final intensification. As such, the *Exercice* presents strong similarities to Carl Czerny's *Toccata*, op. 92 (1826) and to George Onslow's *Toccata*, op. 6, "Caprice" (1811), both in C major.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to the opening "whirling" figure (see Examples 1a-c), all three pieces share double-stops and runs of thirds, sixth, and octaves, leaps and an ongoing sixteenth-note motor-rhythm. We might perhaps speculate about the presence of the "fantastic" or "bizarre" in Schumann's peculiar four-bar introduction on the dominant in virtuosic Paganini-style, and in the counter-rhythmic *sf* accents in the minor section: a feature that Onslow used as well in his *Toccata* to break the regularity of the sixteenth-notes and create a syncopated effect (see Examples 2a and 2b).

Schumann's *Exercice* offers ample opportunity for the performer to practice both detached and *legato* execution, described by Czerny as the basic artistic

<sup>51</sup> Both Czerny's and Onslow's *Toccatas* contain hints of a second theme, but otherwise little similarity to sonata form. There are many recognized influences on Schumann's *Toccata* among the pieces he practiced in those years, including Hummel's *Sonata* op. 81 in F-sharp minor (1819), Johann Baptist Cramer's collection of *Etudes* (1801), and Charles Mayer's *Toccata*. Complete charts of Schumann's daily practice are given in Bodo Bischoff, *Monument für Beethoven: die Entwicklung der Beethoven-Rezeption Robert Schumanns* (Cologne: Dohr, 1994), 11. I believe that Schumann may have been familiar with Chopin's *Etudes*, op. 10, as well. There are no direct quotations of Onslow's or Czerny's *Toccatas*. Schumann practiced many pieces by Onslow in those years and it is reasonable to think that he was acquainted with his *Toccata* as well (see Boetticher, "Robert Schumanns *Toccata* Opus 7," 110, n. 42). The similarities between Schumann's *Exercice* and Czerny's *Toccata* are so pronounced that it seems certain that Schumann knew the piece.



**Example 2a** Schumann, Exercise, mm. 101-104



**Example 2b** Onslow, Toccata, mm. 20-24

equipment of a virtuoso:

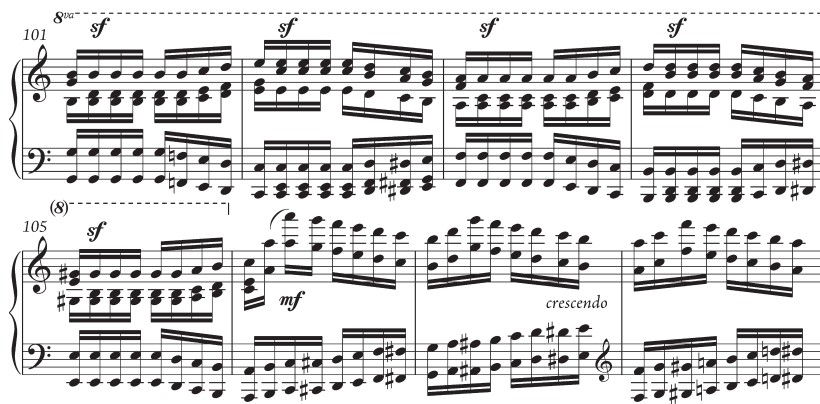
A peculiarly clear, and marked, as well as energetic manner of touching or attacking the keys; by which tone comes out with striking distinctness. Hence every degree of staccato, and any marked separation of the notes is to be considered as belonging to the brilliant style; and consequently the strict *Legato* must be taken as the opposite manner of playing.<sup>52</sup>

Despite its constantly shifting figures and articulations, though, Schumann's *Exercise* is marked by a striking rhythmic implacability. This particular characteristic, to be found within nearly every Etude and Exercise of his day, has historical precedent in the toccatas of Alessandro Scarlatti and Johann Sebastian Bach, as well as the latter's "motoric" preludes and some of the *Goldberg Variations*.<sup>53</sup> From this point of view, then, the transition from "exercise" to "toccata" involved only a small shift: after all, the toccata had effectively merged with these didactic genres in the late eighteenth century.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Carl Czerny, *Vollständige Theoretisch-Praktische Pianoforte-Schule* (1838); quoted and translated in Geoffrey Govier, "The Interpretation of rhythm in Diabelli's Vaterländischer Künstlerverein Variations" (DMA diss., Cornell University, 2003), 25-6.

<sup>53</sup> Joel Lester cited many examples of "motor-rhythms" within Bach's music, noting that these are often combined with a "motivic consistency" (195); "Robert Schumann and Sonata Forms," *19th-Century Music* 18/3 (Spring 1995): 189-210.

<sup>54</sup> A famous example is provided by Muzio Clementi's *Toccata*, op. 11 (1784). Clementi adopted one technical difficulty — here double thirds — within a very simple melodic and harmonic design



**Example 3a** Schumann, Exercise, mm. 101-108



**Example 3b** Schumann, Toccata, mm. 129-36 (4:36)

Its sequence of contrasting sections was reduced to a simple continuous form containing a single technical problem (or various related problems), if perhaps with more articulated formal junctions and greater variety of motives than a standard Etude.

What the toccata had in 1830 that the etude lacked, though, was a position within Music History: and it is the historical weight of the older genre that will provide another layer of meaning to Schumann's *Toccata*, op. 7. As Joel Lester has noted, this work constitutes the composer's first essay in a fully-fledged sonata form: the transition to the dominant key begins at m. 25 (0:32 in the accompanying

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with a homogeneous rhythmic profile.

recording, Track 8) and a second theme at mm. 44-60 (0:55); the development lasts from mm. 98-148 (3:59-5:02); a recapitulation sees the simultaneous return of the tonic and first theme at m. 149 (5:02) and the second theme is given a literal transposition into the tonic at mm. 197-212 (6:02-6:22). In this sense Schumann's historical focus seems rather fuzzy: sonata form, however archaic by 1832, was of course not typically associated with the genre of the toccata. It does, though, serve to provide a stable harmonic structure for the diverse sections of the *Toccata* and, according to Lester, to express the multi-faceted substance of such a piece.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, the Baroque Toccata, seen as a genre that contains other genres, is an apt designation for a piece that seems to “quote” other genres within its structure. One of the most notable of these arrives toward the end of the development section: instead of the *Exercise*'s chains of octaves, Schumann provides a fugato section, with the subject drawn from the piece's opening, which crescendos to a pre-recapitulation climax (see Examples 3a and 3b). Schumann not only inserts a form — the fugue — that is taken from the Baroque tradition, but he builds it from the thematic material of the piece and elaborates it within the frame of the overall rhythmic design.

In a sense, this allusion to the “learned style” functions here as a “serious” inflection of “mechanical virtuosity,” acquiring an absolutely ironic gesture in the process. The Toccata becomes then for Schumann the ideal forum for



**Example 4** Schumann, *Toccata*, mm. 1-4 (:01)

“play” with genres and ideas.

## Irony, Syncopation and Toccata, Opus 7

Yet the most remarkable feature of the *Toccata* is arguably its rhythm. If the *Exercise* was implacably constant, a *perpetuum mobile*, the *Toccata* is pervaded

<sup>55</sup> Lester argues that the sonata-form allows Schumann a better articulation of “separate areas for statement, transition, development, and dénouement, as well as places for activity, repose, and transition from one state to the other — all this while maintaining the motor rhythms and technical effects” (“Robert Schumann and Sonata Forms,” 195).



**Example 5** Schumann, Toccata, mm. 25-6 (0:32)



**Example 6** Schumann, Toccata, m. 38 (0:48)



**Example 7** Schumann, Toccata, m. 52 (1:05)



**Example 8** Schumann, Toccata, mm. 71-2 (1:29)



**Example 9** Schumann, Toccata, m. 121 (4:27)

from opening moments to final coda by rhythmic disruptions and irregularities. The first four measures, for instance, introduce a rhythmic motive of eighth-quarter-eighth, first in both hands and then in the bass only (Example 4).<sup>56</sup>

This relatively standard opening syncopation becomes more complex as the piece progresses. In the transition to the dominant, slurs in the right hand seem to displace the bar line by an eighth note, while the left hand adopts a quicker syncopation of sixteenth-eighth-sixteenth: Example 5 reproduces two measures from this transition. In Examples 6 and 7, syncopations are respectively in the right hand and in both hands.

<sup>56</sup> The beginning of the final version could well be called a *motto* in Schumann's style although it does not appear to be a quotation. It has the brevity and the incisiveness of the beginning of *Davidsbündlertänze* (with a quotation of Clara Wieck's *Mazurka*), and an even simpler harmonic scheme which affects the structure of the piece (see Lester, "Robert Schumann and Sonata Forms," 197).



**Example 10** Schumann, *Toccata*, mm. 173-74 (5:33)



**Example 11** Schumann, *Toccata*, mm. 236-37 (6:51)

The intensity of the syncopation reaches its peak in Example 8, where the right hand plays a *sforzato* on an upbeat sixteenth note. In the development section, syncopations underlie the repeated octave pattern (Example 9), with the same rhythmic configuration as the beginning, and the counter-subject of the fugato, the shape of which is derived from the original melodic idea (as shown in Example 3b).

In the transition of the recapitulation (Example 10), Schumann adopts a double syncopation in the right hand: the pattern of eighth-quarter-eighth is superimposed on an off-beat syncopation (sixteenth-eighth-sixteenth). This “hiccupping” rhythm covers eight bars. In the closing section of the recapitulation the rhythmic displacement becomes even more pronounced: a floating dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note are added onto the first beat upbeat and superimposed on a counter-rhythmic design (Example 11).

At this point, the question begs to be asked: what is the meaning of syncopations and counter-rhythms in the *Toccata*? The key lies in the concept of irony: by subjecting the rhythmic pulse to continuous displacement, Schumann creates a disjunction between the audible and the real, the mechanical and the inner.<sup>57</sup> Thus syncopation becomes a vehicle for irony, a means of exorcizing “mechanical frustrations,” elevating them to the realm of true art and fantastic

<sup>57</sup> Curt Sachs quoted a telling sentence from Schumann himself: “Not frigid metronome figures but the movement’s inner measure is the sole determinant”; see “Rhythm and Tempo: An Introduction,” *Musical Quarterly* 38/3 (July 1952): 398.



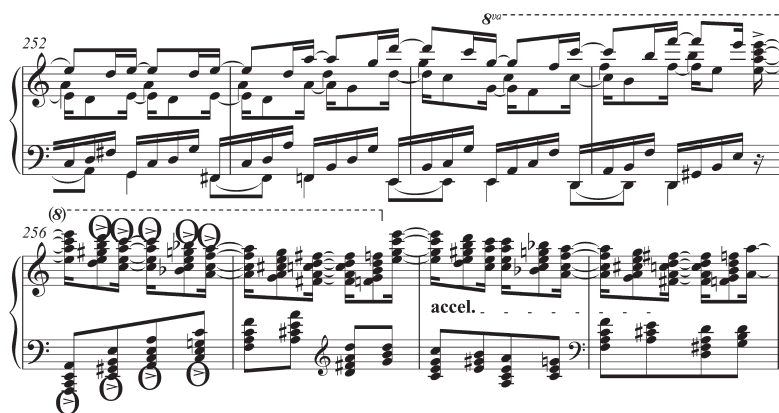
**Example 12** Schumann, *Toccata*, mm. 141-49 (4:50)



**Example 13** Schumann, *Toccata*, mm. 213-14 (6:22)

creation while, at the same time, unveiling the ideology of efficiency as philistine and “mere” muscular discipline. The substantial aesthetical shift between the *Exercice* and the *Toccata* involves the transition from “mechanical virtuosity” to a *reflection* on mechanism, deconstructing the triviality of an etude-like piece. The spirit is blown into the machine by the Romantic *Genie*: mechanics are continuously questioned and interrupted by syncopations and counter-rhythms as in a jammed-up train of gears, cogs and wheels. The *Toccata* acquires — through irony — a very different meaning, one that borders at times on the comical.

Before we draw these inquiries to a close, then, let us turn our attention to the all-important ending. The *Toccata*’s first climax, immediately before the recapitulation (Example 12) becomes paradigmatic for this interpretation. In this passage, accumulating tension leads to an expressive peak, supported by one of the piece’s very few pedal points. The music comes near to freeing itself from



**Example 14** Schumann, Toccata, mm. 252-59 (7:11)

its pervasive rhythmic disruptions, but syncopations remain in the right hand: one may hear the clicks of the mechanism sounding underneath the resonant catharsis. Similarly, in the closing section of the recapitulation (Example 13), *fortissimo* chords interrupt the double sixteenth-note twisters with hidden syncopations in the left hand, and the battle becomes more violent as it dashes up and down the keyboard.

The section before the coda functions as a peroration, if an ironic one. Syncopations are more and more stratified, and the limping alternation of full chords ends in a paroxysm of clashing sounds in *accelerando*, effectively dismantling the second climax of its full grandiose mode (Examples 14 and 15). After this, the piece ends quietly, syncopations dissolving and the second theme sounding a casual moral to the story. The auditory image of the haunted machine, present and tangible just moments ago, now fades without an outward trace, much like Jean Paul's own incursions into dreamland.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> See Frauke, *Robert Schumann als Jean Paul-Leser*, chapter 2: "Szenen-Träume," for an interesting excursus on Jean Paul's dream-like scenes and Schumann's own "dreamy" poems. According to Jean Paul, these scenes represented "the vastness of the space" ("die Weite des Spielraums"). Frauke emphasized the importance of the "the boundless" ("grenzenlosen"; 99), an idea used by Schumann in his poem: "deep stillness, a big, calm sea! Formless, ghostly shadows dragged themselves with ... white ... garments ... to their native land" ("tiefe Stille, ein großes wellenloses Meer! Formlose Geisterschatten zogen mit ... weißen ... Gewändern ... nach ihrer Heimat"). He added that the "dream-visions" of Jean Paul and Schumann can be defined as "the redemption of the soul in the land of poetry" ("Erlösung der Seele in das Land der Poesie"); *Robert Schumann als Jean Paul-Leser*, 100.



**Più mosso**

260

264

268 *p*

273

278

**Example 15** Schumann, *Toccata*, mm. 260-83 (7:20)

With this final, deconstructive gesture, the *Toccata* seems to abdicate its responsibility to provide formal and dramatic conclusion, expressing instead a simple comment at the end of the piece as if from a distance (*Wie aus der Ferne*).<sup>59</sup> This acts to counter-balance the bombastic introduction, being neither rhetorically cogent nor poetically significant, but rather an example of what Heinz Dill has described as the composer's strategy for creating distance,

<sup>59</sup> See Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze*, II. Heft, No. 8.

“toying with the idea of how to end, or when to end, or even not to end at all, just breaking off.”<sup>60</sup> The heroism of the virtuoso pianist, so vividly present at the opening of the *Toccata*, is now only a memory: mediated by the distances between the *then* and the *now*, and between the earnest and the ironic, traversed over the course of the piece. Such distances are effectively collapsed, and their echoes dampened, by performer-initiated climaxes such as Cziffra’s. Allowed to resonate in full complexity, though, the *Toccata*’s ending evokes Jean Paul’s definition of the Romantic: “the undulating hum of a vibrating string or bell, whose sound waves fade away into ever greater distances and finally are lost in ourselves, and which, although outwardly silent, still sound within.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Heinz J. Dill, “Romantic Irony in the Works of Robert Schumann,” *Musical Quarterly* 73/2 (1989): 193.

<sup>61</sup> “das wogende Aussummen einer Saite oder Glocke nennt, in welchem die Tonwooge wie in immer ferneren Weiten schwimmt und endlich sich verliert in uns selber und, obwohl außen schon still, noch immer lautet.” English translation (modified) from Margaret R. Hale, *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter’s School of Aesthetics* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 61; quoted in Hoeckner, “Schumann and Romantic Distance,” 60.