

## From Storybook to Concert Hall: Schumann's Fairy Tales

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Nineteenth-century composers drew inspiration from many of the same sources as musical artists of today: love and other emotions, enjoying parties, and media, notably books. German composer Robert Schumann was no different, incorporating many literary influences into his works. A fan of Jean Paul Richter's novels from the early 1800s, Schumann used various literary tropes in his music, including changeable stylistic choices and an attention to the mysterious and grotesque with deliberately murky harmonies and rhythms. Though applicable to much of his music, his short character piece *Märchenbilder* (trans. *Fairy Tale Pictures*) for viola and piano from 1851 is particularly interesting because of its fairy tale subject matter.

The viola is a member of the violin family, filling the space between the higher sounds of the violin and the lower sounds of the cello. Historically it's been overlooked by composers in favor of the violin because of its darker, less flashy sound, but it's well suited to *Märchenbilder's* more mysterious demands for that reason.

*Märchenbilder* has four short movements in different styles. While Schumann didn't leave any information on which fairy tales the piece is meant to represent, listeners can come up with their own interpretations after listening to each movement's distinct sound world. I'll focus on the first two movements here, marked *Nicht schnell* (Not Fast) and *Lebhaft* (Lively), and their relationship to Jean Paul's 1805 novel *Flegeljahre* (The Twins). *Märchenbilder* is not meant to be a direct musical depiction of Jean Paul's works, so I won't be looking for direct comparisons between the two; instead, I will be isolating some similar themes and techniques.

Jean Paul's works are characterized by abruptly changing styles and extravagant wordplay, and he was a big fan of puns and of music. *Flegeljahre* tells the story of a set of twins, one a traveling flutist and the other of whom comes into a large inheritance that requires him to do a series of unusual tasks. These tasks include tuning pianos for a whole day and working with a gamekeeper "till he has run down a hare, whether it last two hours or two years." Jean Paul's humorous writing frequently moves between points of view and includes documents and letters between characters to support the story. *Flegeljahre*, published in four expansive volumes, follows plotlines for both twins and also includes a love story.

### Changeable Narrative

This changeable style of narrative is also seen in Schumann's music; instead of writing out a longer phrase - a musical sentence - that could span eight or ten bars, composers experimented with shorter motives, one- or two-bar fragments that could be altered and repeated as the composer liked. Schumann used this technique in the first movement of *Märchenbilder* with a descending motive that is first introduced in the piano part, 21 seconds into the included video.

This motive is passed between the viola and piano for the whole movement, with small alterations in notes and ornaments - quicker, decorative notes. By using shorter melodic

material instead of longer phrases that need to be stated in their entirety, Schumann had more freedom to shift the focus between the instruments and play with the character. This freedom emulates Jean Paul's tendency to explore multiple points of view in a single scene.

Stylistic differences are heard in the characters of the movements as well. While the first movement is slower and lush, the second movement is a lively march in a major key. This typically signifies happiness and joy instead of the minor-key sadness present in the first movement.

Though I won't analyze them in depth here, the third and fourth movements also differ in style; the third movement is a quick scherzo emulating a battle and the fourth is a heartfelt, melancholy lullaby. Just as each of these movements offers a distinct sound world, Jean Paul's literature explored many different characters, storylines, and writing styles. Readers are left wondering what will come next, just as listeners are in Schumann's works.

### **Mysterious and Grotesque**

Nineteenth-century literature often featured the mysterious and grotesque - Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a great example - and settings were chosen with nebulous potential in mind. Musicologist L.A. Whitesell said in their 1983 article *E.T.A Hoffmann and Robert Schumann: The Blending of Music and Literature in German Romanticism* that "Wild Nature was a favorite for Romantic stories, as were old or deserted castles...there was a great attraction to darkness, shadows, and night." These settings let imaginations run wild, hiding clues to things that may come.

The opening of the first movement of *Märchenbilder* creates a setting in this darker style. Refer back to the video above to hear the simple rhythm and melody and D minor outlined in arpeggios in both instruments. The low range of the piano and the yearning dynamic swells in both parts combine to create a musical environment that sounds dark and lush. The melodic line in the viola also climbs and falls with no regard for placing higher, more significant notes on the first beat of the bar, a deviation from more structured earlier music. Notes are occasionally tied over barlines, a method of displacing emphasis, which further disguises the rhythm. This characterizes the oftentimes meandering plots and ambiguous characters in nineteenth-century literature, as well as the darker setting of many of these works.

While Schumann titled this work "Fairy Tale Pictures", he didn't claim that any specific tale was used as inspiration, nor did he choose to represent a musical narrative of any tale in particular. There have been speculations, based in his journal entries, that movements of *Märchenbilder* were inspired by the stories of Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin, and Sleeping Beauty, but we cannot claim to know for sure. However, it's very likely that Schumann was familiar with Grimm's Fairy Tales, first published in Germany in 1812 and 1814, and the more Gothic works of E.T.A Hoffmann, both of which could have influenced his composing. As Jean Paul was Schumann's favorite author, I have chosen to focus my literary attention on him, but the literary techniques seen in Jean Paul's writing are also used by the Brothers Grimm and Hoffmann. While

*Märchenbilder* can be enjoyed without awareness of Schumann's influences, knowledge of his interest in literature can bring a listener greater satisfaction and understanding.

Richter, Jean Paul. *Flegeljahre*. Translated by Eliza Lee. Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1846.

Whitesell, L. A. "E. T. A. Hoffmann and Robert Schumann: The Blending of Music and Literature in German Romanticism." *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 13 (June 1983): 73-101.