Eusebius and Florestan, Pierrot and Harlequin

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Abstract: This video and article are inspired by Robert Schumann's use of characterization in his music and writings, and the affinities of these sometimes kaleidoscopic and multiple musical and critical perspectives with theatre, fragmentary scenographies, and costume. Drawing on the traits of Schumann's own characters Florestan, Euesbius, Master Raro, as well as other personas such as Harlequin and Pierrot, I have aimed, in my audiovisual collage and performance of a hypothetical 4th movement to Schumann's 1851 Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in A minor (Op. 105), to create a mediation between disparate aspects of the music, envisioned as personality fragments scattered in the landscape of the piece. The video itself is a meditation on, and an outcome of the realities of the pandemic, and the isolation that intruded in such a sustained manner on my personal and professional life. The video is an impromptu assemblage of pre-pandemic footage and photography combined to create a collective virtual chamber music experience representing an internal world haunted by dissonant multiple characters. In some ways, I echo in performance certain suggestive strains of Schumann's own creative imagination and his personifications, both musically and in his critical writings, of the characters Florestan and Eusebius whom he sought to amalgamate in the figure of Master Raro.

Keywords: Robert Schumann, violin, piano, music, costume, mental health, pandemic, isolation, video, photography, psychology, psyche, collaboration, composition, internal, external

Watch the video: ***Eusebius and Florestan, Pierrot and Harlequin***.

In a 2021 article in The Guardian titled: "That way madness lies: why the obsession about diagnosing Robert Schumann?" the author, Phil Hebblethwaite, relates the troubling history of mental health in Schumann's family and the commonplaceness of the association between mental health and Schumann's musical works. He cites, for example, pianist and psychiatrist Dr. Richard Kogan, who, in 2015, went so far as to assert that Schumann's *Carnaval Op. 9* for solo piano "could not have been written by somebody who did not have bipolar disorder." Similarly, musicologists Peter and Lise Otswald, known for their work on music and psychiatry have found evidence in Schumann's own writing that he positively identified with multiple personalities in

himself (Otswald 2010, 40). The question is controversial, even if Schumann himself opened the dialogue associating his personal life with his work.

In both his literary and musical compositions, Schumann carefully constructed and drew on a cast of contrasting fictional characters that embodied multiple, sometimes fragmentary perspectives in his work (Daverio 1997, 127). In 1834 he became founder and editor of the journal *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and it was here that the imaginary personas of Florestan, Eusebius, and Master Raro, among others, offered musical commentary in line with their respective and antithetical personalities. Furthermore, Schumann featured these imagined characters as members of the *Davidsbündler* music society and represented them, as well as other historical and theatrical figures such as Pierrot and Harlequin, in his music. In particular, these characters predominate in piano works such as his *Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6* and *Carnaval, Op. 9*.

In developing the characters of Florestan and Eusebius, Schumann clearly drew influence from Jean Paul's book, *Flegeljahre,* which presents the vastly different brothers Walt and Vult who represented a dualism that, according to Otswald, Schumann acknowledged in himself (Otswald 2010, 40). While Florestan represents the masculine, extroverted, dynamic, audacious, powerful, tempestuous, and impulsive side of Schumann; Eusebius, by contrast, is the feminine, introspective, passive, dreamy, impractical, contemplative, and sensitive side of the composer. Schumann created a third character, Master Raro, to mediate between Florestan and Eusebius and to amalgamate the inner discrepancies between the multiple personalities that the composer had written about within himself (ibid. 121). According to Schumann, "Florestan and Eusebius [are] my double nature, and I want, like Raro, to amalgamate [them] into one man" (Schumann, Brahms 1927, 77, author's translation). These multiple personalities may have been reflections of Schumann's own struggle with mental health, which manifested in the form of hallucinations, depressive episodes, an attempted suicide, and his eventual confinement to a mental institution where he ultimately died.

Hoping to prevent the obscurity of her husband's work, in 1839 Clara Schumann urged Robert to leave out character inscriptions in order to make the music more relatable and increase its appeal to the public (Watkins 2011, 115). Perhaps having taken her advice, the *Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in A Minor, Op. 105* of 1851 contains no direct references to the characters, although there are distinct Florestinian and Eusebian features in the work (Daverio 1997, 462). The piece begins with a tempestuous and emotionally swirling first movement, followed by a more subdued second movement and a final, driving *perpetuum mobile* which ends the piece. Whereas the first movement powerfully integrates both the stormy and contemplative sides of the Florestan and Eusebius dichotomy in what could be considered a Raro-like

incorporation and exchange of musical ideas, the second and third movements remain separate, and less integrated. There is a general consensus that the work starts much more strongly than it ends (Tibbetts 2010, 295), and seems to lack the closure of a boisterous yet lyrical closing movement that would incorporate the Eusebian and Florestanian character traits as does the first movement.

The 1833 Malaria Pandemic took a heavy toll on the Schumann family. His sister died of the disease during the pandemic and Robert himself contracted, but ultimately recovered from it. The personal tragedy and loss were compounded for Schumann by his brother's death of tuberculosis earlier the same year. This point marked the beginning of a breakdown for Schumann: he isolated himself and avoided facing his loss by throwing himself into his composition and work on the journal he had founded (Otswald 2010, 113). The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic makes these lived experiences and confrontation with the uncertainties and tragedies of life all the more vivid.

As a result of Covid-19, I have found the theme of isolation to be especially poignant, especially with the necessity of social distancing and considerations of transmission-prevention. As an artist, I felt compelled to band together and create a community, as it were, with myself, and to explore more deeply the internal relationships between the vastly different characters that are present to my individual psyche. I, too, have struggled to come to terms with seemingly incompatible parts of myself and to incorporate them into life and artistic practice. In this way, the pandemic presented me with an opportunity to reconfigure the traces of a distant social fabric by self-collaboration as I traversed new avenues of digital and textile media to represent an individual as well as collective internal experience.

The video originates in pre-pandemic footage of me performing on the violin the predominantly Eusebian second movement of the first violin sonata superimposed on footage of me performing the preeminently Florestinian third movement of the same piece in order to combine both personas to maximum effect. The two musical lines intermingle and weave in and out as they alternate dominance to create a multidimensional, audio and visual interaction between the two dispositions. However, in imagining my virtual presentation of the fictitious fourth movement of the Schumann sonata, I see no reason to limit the visual presentation to two characters. The music is haunted by a plethora of spectators and participants, and these characters too, with their individual perspectives, found their place in my video footage.

I represent these different aspects and allow them to express themselves through the mediation of the costumes that I designed and created myself. They symbolize the parts, or aspects of my character that are ever-present in my experience. While the Florestan and Eusebius movements of Schumann's violin sonata have been combined and reimagined into a single, impactful, Raro-like fourth movement, my costuming and

video overlays express in a personalized echo, a creative vision alongside Schumann's. Once the entire troupe of representations have emerged together, they disappear with the final *pizzicato* which breaks the spell and brings the viewer back to the external world, where the multifaceted inner realm is not visible and all that can be seen is the original, isolated physical forms alone on stage.

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