

# The Singular Capture of a Moment: Robert Schumann and Translation

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## Abstract

This paper is part of a broader research project, which involves the translation into Brazilian Portuguese of the *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker (Collection of Writings on Music and Musicians)* of the German composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856). Originally published between 1834 and 1844 in the journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, the texts that compose the writings were put together by Schumann himself between 1852 and 1854. Sharply attuned to the aesthetic ideals of his time, Schumann registered in his writings his impressions and comments on the musical and literary scene in the first half of the nineteenth century in Germany. This study examines *On Music and Musicians* with special emphasis on the reviews written between 1834 and 1836, in order to identify echoes of the main ideas on language and translation developed in Germany between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. The bases for the study are two focal points, both of them brought to light by the notion of poetic creativity (*Dichtung*): The first one is anchored vertically and operates within the subject that moves from music to literature and vice versa, or from one language to another. The second one takes into account the shaping of the immersion into an element which will break down the barriers of time and, in one movement, bring the past into the present and include the future. In this sense, translation in Schumann's writings is entirely imbued with the notion of movement and is regarded as a creative human activity, whose capacity to transform senses depends on one's potentialities of using the language, thus promoting the diffusion of knowledge and the construction of identities.

**Keywords:** Robert Schumann; German Romantic; Translation

Schubert's variations are for Wilhelm Meister  
as sound is to the word [ ... ]  
they are a Goethe novel composed in music  
a novel that he would still like to write.  
(Schumann, *Journals*, Volume I: 96)

The life and work of Robert Schumann (1810-1856) are perhaps the most eloquent example of a peculiar exercise in translation: transfer between words and music, which is so important for those who take interest in the arts of sound and the word.

Schumann, a composer, writer, critic, and interpreter, received a solid education in languages and literature during his studies at Zwickau School in Saxony. He learned Latin and Greek when he was between 7 and 9 years old, and later, when still a teenager, French, English and Italian. He worked as a translator, editor, proofreader, and turned into music, throughout his short life, all of his vast literary experience.

The son of a bookseller in Zwickau, Schumann helped his father, also a translator, and translated Greek and Latin poets, such as Horace, Tibullus, Anacreon, and Theocritus. Following the example of other contemporaries, Greek and Latin poets formed the basis for the development of his literary expression.

Even though he decided for music in 1830, he would never totally abandon his endeavours in literature and translation. Proof of this are the texts he translated and adapted for his symphonic and vocal pieces: *Das Paradies und die Peri*, in 1843, on a libretto by Thomas Moore, translated and adapted by the composer himself, and the 60 or so *Lieder* he wrote for texts by Burns, Álvaro de Almeida, Byron, Thomas Moore, Andersen, Shelley, Shakespeare etc. These are only a few examples.

"Music shows poetry at its greatest potential",<sup>2</sup> Schumann registers in his *Journal* (96). Firstly this approximates Schumann to the concept of the potentialization of the work of art, as formulated by Novalis (Gieseler), and to translation as an intrinsic activity in poetic creation: if poetry exists as a universal force, if it exists independently of human effort and artistic creation, art itself is not creative, but re-creates this poetry, performing an act of translation on the poetry. Understood, then, as a category of creation, translation for the romantics takes on the role of a metaphor of poetic making, and thus the function of the translator, as stated by Novalis (73) in Fragment 68, is that of the "poet of poets".

A voracious reader, Schumann read everything he came upon and shared with his contemporaries and philosophers of language a taste for translation, both as poetical creation (*Dichtung*) and as a form of progressively enriching the repertoire of subjects and forms in German literature and music, and even of reviewing one's own identity within the dynamics of difference between the Known and the Unknown.

In *On Music and Musicians*, a collection of reviews originally published between 1834 and 1844 in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, in Leipzig, and collected by the composer toward the end of his life, there are several passages in which Schumann refers to issues connected in varying degrees with translation.

His reflection on the creative process in music and literature reveals a composer finely attuned to the ideas on language and translation developed during the passage from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, and illustrates how Schumann interferes with the prevailing canon of his times as he engages in musical and literary criticism. Certain parallels between the thoughts of Schumann and those of contemporary poets and philosophers show the extent to which Schumann, in his

dealings with music and written texts, identified with the dominant tides of the period on language and translation.

The starting point for these pronouncements is the traffic between music and literature, which, as we know, was very familiar to him:

I could have called the cycle [of songs] simply "Music for texts by Heine", as this is how they differentiate from those of Mendelssohn. In the case of Taubert, they are songs inspired by poems; in the case of Mendelssohn, they are songs, which, on the contrary, inspire poems. I do not know whether the music follows throughout the poem which inspired it, whether it reproduces the basic tonality of the entire poem or just the sense of the theme to which it alludes; I suppose, however, that it is the latter case for most of the pieces. (Eight Troubadour Songs for the pianoforte op. 16, by Taubert.) (Schumann, *Schriften* 99-100 [1835])

This familiarity with putting literature into music and vice versa, however, has nothing to do with imitation:

The disgrace of an imitator lies in appropriating for himself only what is conspicuous. As to copying what is truly beautiful in an original, he dares not do it, as if held back by a sort of natural shame. (Schumann, *Schriften* 21 [1834])

About the superficiality of imitation when translating, Schleiermacher (1813) comments:

Neither did the imitator want to put into contact the writer and the reader of the imitation, because he does not maintain any immediate link between them, but merely seeks to ultimately produce a similar impression, like that received from the original work by his contemporaries. (Schleiermacher 55)

And, returning to Schumann:

It is certainly an error to think that composers take paper and pen with the pitiable intention of conveying, drawing or portraying this and that. (Schumann, *Schriften* 84 [1834])

However, the composer does not rule out or totally negatively judge the possibility of feelings being portrayed in the works. When reviewing Berlioz' Symphony, he comments:

On the other hand, one must not consider too small the possible influences and impressions coming from outside. Subconsciously and parallel to the musical imagination, an idea often continues to act; parallel to the ear, the eyes; and these eyes, organs in permanent activity, retain, amid sounds and tones, certain contours that, as the music advances, may condense and turn into recognizable images. (Schumann, *Schriften* 84 [1835])

"The acting of an idea": The sole purpose in this coming and going between literature and music, between two different realms of signs, is a search for the essence of an idea, for the synthesis of creation. It is also an assumption in an artist's background, a notion that Schumann shares with other poets and thinkers of his age:

An educated musician will know how to derive from the study of a Madonna by Raphael the same benefit a painter derives from a symphony by Mozart. And more: for the sculptor, each actor becomes a motionless statue; these, on the other hand, transform his works into living figures; for the painter, a poem becomes an image, whereas musicians translate paintings into music. (Schumann, *Schriften* 26 - Eusebius [1835])

Also in Goethe, we read:

The new resources I drew upon in my most recent poem were all learned from the plastic arts. For, in a work that stands as a sensorial whole before us, superfluities are more conspicuous than in a work that unfolds in a sequence of images before the eyes of our spirits. (Letter to Schiller, written in Weimar on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1797, *Briefen* 367-368)

In art, therefore, there cannot be any barriers. Everything is movement. But there is indeed the challenge of form, which contains the idea and whose treatment allows us to see the dimensions of the artist:

Form is the vessel of the spirit. Larger spaces require larger spirits to fill them . . . . We are wont to draw conclusions about a thing on the basis of the name it bears; thus our demands from a "fantasia" are different from those from a "sonata". In second-class talents, a command of the traditional form is enough; first-class spirits are

allowed to extend this form. Only a genius can proceed with absolute freedom. (Schumann, *Schriften* 70 [1835])

Schumann's statement points to the constraints of the genre, while linking them to the time and tradition of the receiving culture. And precisely in this connection we find the challenge of the form for the poet and the musician: learning from the Unknown and deciding how to present it to the Known. In this sense, Goethe observed:

Why do we so rarely make an epigram in the Greek sense? Because we see so few things that deserve it. Why do we have so little success in writing epics? Because we have no listeners. And why is there so much work in the theatre? Because among us drama is the only kind of poetic creation that can stimulate the senses and in whose exercise today certain pleasure can be found. (Letter to Schiller, written in Weimar on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1797, *Briefen* 414)

I am in a state of great poverty, which I readily want to share and deplore. After your departure, I read a little more of Sophocles' *Electra*. The long, relentless iambs, the turns and counterturns of its sentences, have impressed me in such a way that the short lines of *Iphigenie* now seem lame and unreadable, and endowed with a sickening sonority. I have immediately set out to completely transform the first scene. (Letter to Herder, written in Carlsbad at the end of August 1786, *Briefen* 223)

This exercise in transposal, therefore, which entails handling form and genres in order to transform them into another thing, takes place in a *locus* with restricted access:

Ordinary men are peculiarly reluctant to enter the workplace of genius: they do not want to know about the reasons, tools, and secrets of creation, in the same way that nature reveals a certain weakness in covering its roots with earth. (Schumann, *Schriften* 83 [1835])

It is here, in this unrevealed *locus*, in the domain of the individual, that the process of creation, recreation, translation and transforming the world takes place. It is hard not to draw here a parallel with the singularity of meaning production in language, formulated by Schleiermacher in his 1813 treatise:

[It] is the live force of the individual who, originally just with the momentary purpose of sharing a transient consciousness, produces, in the malleable matter of language, new forms, of which, however, sometimes more, sometimes less, remain in the language, and, collected by others, spread their forming effect. (Schleiermacher 50)

[E]very discourse . . . wants to be understood in two ways; on the one hand, through the spirit of the language from whose elements it is formed, as an exposition tied to and conditioned by this spirit, produced and enlivened by this spirit in the speaker; on the other hand, it wants to be understood through the mood of the speaker as his action, as something that only through his way of being could thus appear and be clarified. (Schleiermacher 51)

This level where creation takes place, where the forms of the world dematerialize into signs, debunks the notion of an objective understanding of reality. For literature, as much as for music, so-called “external reality” has first to be dissolved and only then reprocessed in the subject to re-emerge under a new form. Humboldt (1807) observes:

Whoever utters the word cloud does not think of either a definition or *a* specific image of this phenomenon of nature. All the different concepts and different images of the phenomenon, all the sensations that line up in the perception, everything, in short, which is connected to this phenomenon inside and outside of us may be presented to the spirit, and does not run any risk of being confused, because this *single* sound fixes and makes the whole remain cohesive. (Humboldt, “Sobre a natureza da linguagem em geral” 15 [1807]; my italics)

Schumann seems to agree with all this. For a musician, more familiarized with abstraction by the very nature and medium of his art, the dissolution of things into symbols moves the materiality of an external reality into the musical texture: “Music speaks the most general language, by means of which the soul perceives itself as free and indefinite, but in its own homeland” (Schumann, *Schriften* 19 [1834]).

For the poet, this same reality is dissolved and reconstructed inside the texture of discourse. In both cases, it is a most personal representation of this reality, its translation, therefore, wrought by and in the subject. In Humboldt, in whose writings analogies with music are also frequent, we read:

All linguistic forms are symbols, not the things themselves. Not conventional signs, but sounds that bear with the things and concepts they represent a truly mystical relationship, a relationship that is mediated by the spirit from which they sprang and continue to spring; sounds that contain, as it were, the objects of reality dissolved in ideas, and may, in a way we should consider limitless, modify, determine, separate, and establish relationships. (Humboldt, “Introdução a Agamêmnon” 107-108 [1816])

In a more specific reference to translation, in a review of 1835, the composer comments on the Germanizing of musical terms proposed by the critic Gottschalk Wedel as a way of preserving German identity:

Wedel must have perceived long ago that we also cherish the object of his considerations. In this sense, the Review tries to publish the titles of compositions in the most German form as possible; the eyes will then become used to this and not find it odd that a *mit inniger Empfindung* (with deep feeling) should produce the same effect of a *con grand' espressione* (with great expression); and then, for both sides, this will look natural. (Schumann, *Schriften* 31 [1835])

In the review, Schumann does not seem willing to see the issue in terms of an opposition between Germanizing or not Germanizing musical terms - mainly French and Italian at that time - but rather as a gradual assimilation of the Other by the Self.

This position may lead us to wonder whether Schumann had read Goethe's notes for the *West-Eastern Divan*, published in 1819. In them, the poet describes the reception of a foreign element as a gradual process, embodied in the well-known three modes of translation: the prosaic, the parodistic, and the identifying translation. The three modes are a proposal for preparing the soil, or familiarizing the eyes, as Schumann would have it, for the reception of the Other by the Self.

This awareness of meaning production in language and of the interference, through translation, on the effects it may cause, is evident in a note in which Schumann shows himself perfectly at ease to make a free translation, in this case, of a review by another critic, Fétis, of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*:

Truly desperate, we read the article as we performed the piece on the piano. On the whole, our judgment of it proved more and more contrary to that of Mr Fétis, so much so that we - in part to doubly attract the attention of Germans to this ingenious republican, in part to give each of them an opportunity to make comparisons - decided to present to our readers a free and abridged translation of Fétis' reviews. (Schumann, *Schriften* 75 [1835]; my emphasis)

Here, the free and shortened translation by Schumann has the purpose of facilitating the understanding of readers, smoothing away all passages that could lead them to conclusions other than his own. And he does so while making his interference clearly noticeable, giving them an opportunity of comparing and dissociating authorships.

Assuming this interference, the mutual reciprocation of the activity of translating can also be traced in many of Goethe's remarks in his letters. Among them, for example:

I put aside the *Tancredo* yesterday morning. Translated, and here and there a little more, I have the end of the second act, the third and fourth acts, without completing either. With this, I believe, I have already guaranteed the noblest entrails of the play, *to which I still have to add some poetry, something alive, in order to give the*

*beginning and the end a little more filling than the original.* (Letter to Schiller, written in Jena in August 1800, *Briefe* 499; my italics)

And also:

By the end of the week I shall have translated the final three acts [of *Tancredo*] and I want to save the first two to attack them at a time when I am less tired . . . . It is in effect a play to be seen, as everything in it is exposed to the eyes *and I can emphasise this characteristic of the play further, and I am less cramped than the French.* (Letter to Schiller, written in Jena on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1800, *Briefe* 497; my italics)

We can find a similar purpose, albeit with a different strategy, in the following passage, taken from a note that Schumann adds to his review. Here, the interpretation of the quotation of the French politician Odilon Barrot (1791 - 1873) to a “milder German” is expanded and added to, and the notion of translating is placed at the service of a critical attitude of the composer in replying to Barrot’s assertion:

Not long ago, Odilon Barrot uttered a word that struck our youth. He said: “Dans notre époque, je ne sais, qui s’est imaginé, que tout ce qui est dans la nature est beau, qu’il y a une certaine poésie dans le crime”, which, *in a milder German*, means: “Beware, my young people, of being enraptured and doing illegal things through nature and passion; listen to the call of nature; say sincerely the way in which you love and with whom you are angry! Preserve, however, what nature so gently brings: the innocence that, though it may lack, does not sin – enraptured, but not consumed”. (Schumann, *Schriften* 85 [1835]; my emphasis)

In this passage, Schumann deliberately interferes in Barrot’s text in order to show his disagreement. Schumann seems to know that the attitude of the translation may and should vary in accordance with its intended purpose. Though he supports Novalis when describing the poetization of music, and for his translation exercises from the ancient classics he favours foreignization, at times breaking with the structure of German as stated by a number of his commentators, here, in his day-to-day criticism, he takes a pragmatic line.

However, if the product of creation bears the subject’s mark, its performance is marked by the fleeting nature of moments, which only suggests and intimates. In music and translation, bringing the past to the present initiates a progressive movement that simultaneously points to reception and the future. And if translation has appeared so far as a metaphor for making poetry or as a way to punctuate and direct the reception, the idea of bringing down the boundaries of time in translation allows for another analogy: now with the triad, where a single chord is formed by two

superimposed chords - C, E, G, for instance: "Third chord = time. The third brings past and future together in the present." (Schumann, *Schriften* 23 [1834]).

The superimposition of third intervals suggests that striking a note, whatever it is, implies both remembrance and expectation. In his notes to a *Doctrine of Sounds*, Goethe says: "Thus, a fundamental tone in C progressively generates a C major harmony and, retrospectively, an F minor harmony" (Goethe [1810], *apud* Schuback 59).

So, if the products of creation, ordained along the horizontal axis of time, are but glimpses of moments, conditioned by the evolutionary stage of languages, literatures, as well as music, similarly, the practice of criticism, employed by Schumann to interfere with the canon, can only be understood as the reflection of a moment:

[T]here is no art in the world and, therefore, no criticism, whose scope is not determined by the cultural level and character of a given nation. (Schumann, *Schriften* 92f. [1835])

Creation and the translation it contains can thus be confirmed as ephemeral celebrations of a meeting, which highlights the subject, breaks down the barriers of time and makes clear the difference. The exercise of this encounter reawakens the past:

A drama without a living representation before our eyes is a dead and alien drama for the public, as it is a form of composing poetry in music without the hand to execute it. (Schumann, *Schriften* 26 [1834])

The exercise of the meeting also points to the future. In several passages from his *Schriften*, and also his *Journal*, Schumann repeats a quote from the novel by Jean Paul (1795), one of his favourite writers:

O art of sounds, which brings so close to our wounds the past and future with their flying flames. Are you the breath of the night of this life or the morning air of the other? (Jean Paul, *Hesperus* [1795], 28. Hundsposttag, 3. Osterfeiertag. Quoted in Gieseler 64)

No wonder, then, that the simultaneity found in a triad and in translation is uncomfortable:

[T]he ancient text does not wish to be read and understood merely within the linguistic and hermeneutic possibilities which are traditionally made by the reading of other texts, whether they are translated texts or not. The metre of the Greek verse softens the harshness of the German verse. The modulations in the composition of the Romantics introduce atmospheres which surprise the listener. In music, as in literature, the unexpected makes possible and demands a rereading of tradition. Forced beyond its limits, the tonal system, like the linguistic system, opens up the possibilities of reception. In both cases, we have sounds that, according to Humboldt, were latent in an instrument that had not yet been played, and now, at first, they lead to a harmonic solution outside the norms, unexpected, that does not lead the listener back to the base tonality, and goes beyond the harmonic range classical ears had been used to. (Azenha 52f.)

This discomfort is, by its own nature, a condition suggesting a new dislocation. The contraction that narrows the focus of a lens to record a fragment both captures the moment and sets forth the challenge of discovering what comes next. Robert Schumann is perfectly aware of all this and embodies in his work as a writer, critic, reader, musician, and poet, the quintessential romantic thinking on translation; and, like his contemporaries, he also contributed, in his own way, to prepare the ground for our present ideas on translation. Poetic creation, simultaneity, and movement: in music, as in translation, we do not have the solace of firm ground and must embrace the task of learning to live with the fleetingness of moments.

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## Notes

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