

Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61

ROBERT SCHUMANN

B. June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Saxony, Germany

D. July 29, 1856, Endenich near Bonn, Germany

Premiered November 5, 1846 at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig by the Gewandhaus Orchestra with Felix Mendelssohn conducting.

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two B-flat clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings (approx. 34 minutes).

Schumann's conception of the Symphony No. 2 was likely shaped by the nervous breakdown he suffered in 1844, as well as by his concern for the continuation of the Germanic symphonic tradition in the void left by the deaths of Beethoven and Schubert. Both concerns - his personal struggle on one hand and the future of symphonic form on the other - caused Schumann to re-conceptualize his approach to large-scale form, as is evident in this symphony. Rather than presenting thematically unrelated movements, Schumann here links the four together with themes and moods that can often be traced to the opening of the first movement. In addition, the tonal plan of the symphony is unorthodox. Instead of creating tension and drama by exploring contrasting keys in the central movements (a strategy typical in symphonic form), every movement of this symphony is centered on the same pitch - C.

At least in retrospect, Schumann saw the symphony as part of his own emotional trials and recovery. He alluded to the circumstances of the symphony's composition in a letter of 2 April 1849: "I wrote the symphony in December 1845 when I was still half sick; it seems to me that one must hear this in it. Not until [writing] the last two movements did I begin to feel myself again; actually, after finishing the entire work my health did improve. But otherwise, as I said, it reminds me of a dark time."

The key of C major, however, seems to suggest hope and redemption in the symphony. It may also remind us of Schumann's Germanic predecessors, in particular Beethoven and his Symphony No. 5 as well as Schubert and his "Great" C-Major Symphony. For Schumann, however, the key of C was likely also an allusion to his wife Clara's first initial. If so, then the optimism that closes the symphony, its clear affirmation of C, and the final plagal ("amen") cadence would seem to indicate Clara as the redemptive "hero" of the symphony. Further

allusions to Clara include the melody of “*Widmung*” - a song that Schumann presented to Clara on their wedding day in 1840 - heard in the fourth movement. Whether aware of these dedicatory elements or not, Clara appreciated the symphony. Following an 1847 performance in Zwickau, she wrote in her diary, “this work in particular enthuses and enraptures me because it contains a bold dash, a deep passion as in none of Robert’s other works! An entirely distinct character and an entirely different feeling prevail. . . . [It] numbers among my most treasured musical pleasures.”

The structure of the symphony, though not overtly programmatic, suggests an underlying poetic or even novelistic narrative, possibly reminiscent of Schumann’s personal struggle with mental illness. The slow opening of the first movement lays out this psychological world as a tension between reflective introspection and extroverted jubilation: two ideas are contrasted in the opening bars as the strings play a languorous chorale while the brasses sound a distant fanfare. In the following *allegro* section, the fanfare speeds up and becomes a martial primary theme. The ensuing harmonic plan, wavering inconclusively around two keys then weakly affirming the tonic only late in the exposition and the recapitulation, is atypical of a sonata-allegro first movement.

Schumann makes another departure from model symphonic form by placing the scherzo as the second movement. This switch adds weight to the slow movement by suggesting a progression from the inner world of the third movement into the extroverted finale. The scherzo is brisk and carefree, but a reminder of the topic of the symphony comes at the end of the movement, which is heralded by the abrupt return of the brass fanfare.

The third movement, *adagio espressivo*, is the most introspective. After the yearning melody (which stretches through two large leaps by seventh) is heard three times, the horns interject distant fanfares. Then the opening melody returns, traded between solo woodwinds and strings, and gains intensity with each iteration.

The exuberant C-major scales that hail the arrival of the fourth movement, *allegro molto*, shatter the third’s thoughtful reverie. From the finale’s first bars until the end of the movement, the home key C is firmly established and the earlier ambivalence toward the tonic is forgotten in exuberance and triumph. The initial tension between the chorale melody and fanfare returns, but now the chorale supports the optimistic mood of the fanfares. The fanfare and chorale are

entwined in counterpoint, bringing the symphony to a bright and triumphant, if slightly bombastic, close.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Schumann's Symphony No. 2 on April 12, 2003 with Andreas Delfs conducting.

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Sources and further reading: See Linda Correll Roesner's article "Schumann" in *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony*, ed. D. Kern Holoman (New York: Schirmer, 1997).

Program note by Jesse A. Johnston, doctoral candidate in Musicology at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theater and Dance.