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In Praise of Stream-of-Consciousness Writing

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I have an ambivalent relationship with the piano. I think it is one of the finest inventions of humanity alongside the wheel and sliced bread, and although I would not in any sense cast myself as a "pianist", I can find my way around it enough to enjoy jamming popular jazz standards. But there is something about the instrument that I do not like. It may be that the sound is too percussive, or that its equal temperament jars my sense of ease.

I am reconciled to the fact that hammers striking strings offer an impressive range of expressive possibilities, and that the price paid for these capabilities is an instrument for ever out of tune. Wheels joined by axles with mathematical precision offer conveniences for our busy lives, and the "equally tempered" loaf means I can guarantee a perfect slice of toast every morning for breakfast. So too the piano. I accept its tuning compromises because of the benefits it affords.

During my commute to work in the entertainment bubble that is my car, sated by toast, I listen in surround sound to classical music beamed into me from the local radio station. "Drive" programs sometimes feature portions of Schumann's piano concerto,[1] yet because of my equivocations about the solo instrument, I was dismissive. But this concerto kept appearing and I felt that it was haunting me. I decided to surrender, get with the program, and get serious.

I applied to the truism that one cannot appreciate a piece of classical music on just one hearing and determined to listen to this piece several times before passing judgement. I became hooked, unable to get enough of it, listening at lunchtime, after dinner, and before bed, exploring different versions and soloists, working through the score until I felt that it had become a comfortable companion.

Familiarity with the piece invoked questions. I struggled to make sense of Schumann's writing and could not square it with other concerti I know. Adding to my quest to understand, was the 2012 recording made by soloist Martha Argerich and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra conducted by Riccardo Chailly.[2] It seemed to me that Argerich took liberties with the tempo of the opening lyrical sequence, and I wanted to know why. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The concerto's opening is perhaps one of the most dramatic in the repertoire. The orchestra begins with a loud unison E followed by a descending flourish from the piano confirming the home key of A minor. In the 4th measure, the mood flips to a soft melodic passage in the woodwinds repeated by the soloist. In the space of 10 seconds Schumann has introduced

[1] Schumann Piano Concerto, in A minor, Op. 54, completed 1845.
[2] Schumann Piano Concerto, in A minor, OP. 54 Martha Argerich & Riccardo Chailly - YouTube

the two characters, Florestan and Eusebius, who he invented to express several sides of his personality: Florestan, with an impulsive almost incandescent nature named after a hero and Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, and Eusebius borrowed from the 4th century saint with a contemplative, reflective disposition.

Some commentators suggest that Schumann has created a work replete with conflict centred around these two characters as they interact together. However, I could not hear conflict but rather conversation. The opening is the invitation: "Let's talk." The remainder of the concerto is a discussion between friends. Sometimes it is with the piano and woodwinds, and at others, the lower strings. These exchanges come with an overarching tenderness rather than aggressive confrontation.

From its beginning in A minor the concerto passes through various keys to its ending in A major. In terms of music tonality, this is more a journey across town than a chat over the fence, and as with all odysseys, there are many unpredictable twists and turns. One writer, in a passing comment, praised Schumann for his stream-of-consciousness writing, and it was this singular statement that unlocked the work for me. I abandoned my need to discern his use of accepted forms and acknowledged that in their absence something other would appear.

Martha Argerich provides the clue. In the recording that I recommend, during the first lyrical sequence she lingers over the melody but rushes the three connecting notes before the repeated phrase (see timecode 0:01:01–0:01:11). It's as if she is swatting away an annoying fly and by her apparent disregard for the notes, draws our attention to them. In the score Schumann adds the instruction to play softly and then in the three connecting notes to *crescendo* (increase volume) to a *sforzando* (forced) chord to start the mirrored phrase. He does not ask the soloist to change tempo, and the orchestra plays these notes in time. It is consistent with Romantic ideals that the soloist is free to mess with tempi and perhaps Argerich takes the instruction *espress* (to play expressively) as her cue for her nonchalance.

These three notes caught my attention, and I tracked them through the work. Where in the beginning they seem an annoying interference, they gradually take on greater significance. The second movement – Intermezzo – begins with the same figure now taking on a more central role (beginning 0:15:36). They reappear at the beginning of the third movement (beginning 0:21:24) and are the basis of the fugal section (beginning 0:24:22). Sometimes they are collapsed and buried within the orchestra as a pulsating figure (at 0:27:54), then inverted as a descending phrase (at 0:20:56) and at others an integral part of the melodic design (throughout the third movement beginning at 0:21:24).

How to understand this short figure? It is not, in the Beethovenian sense, a motif that insists on our attention[3] but is, rather, an ever-present idea that accompanies the conversation as it progresses. It is more like Leopold Bloom's cake of soap in Joyce's *Ulysses* than an irritating bug; an epyllion that interpolates into the conversation between Schumann's imaginary characters.

To be sure, the interactions between the Florestan and Eusebius do not come without ambiguities and sometimes intentions are unclear and meanings fuzzy. For example, the liminal space between the second and third movements makes it difficult to discern where one ends and the other begins. Then there is the offbeat melodic phrase in the strings followed by the woodwinds emphasising the usually weak second pulse of the figure (beginning 0:22:19) and the cross-measure phrasing (beginning 0:24:22) which destabilises rhythmic certainty.

[3] The most well-known example is *Symphony* No. *5* in C minor Op. 67 and the so-called "fate" motif.

There are many other delights to be found in this concerto and I have only managed to introduce it, perhaps teasing readers to engage with it too. Perhaps, also, there is an analogy at work, and without forcing this beyond passing allusion, Schumann may provide an apt companion as we at *Organizational Aesthetics* reflect on the past 10 years and chart a course into the future.

Schumann understood the music traditions that made his works sensible. He knew established forms and understood the potential relationships among tonal structures that animate works. His contribution is, however, to acknowledge that there are alternative ways to create knowledge and that some of the forms which he inherited could become inhibiting straitjackets. He did not abandon the past but through his writing demonstrated alternatives within constraints. His use of the fugal form in the third movement is testament to his comfort and ease in using available materials.

We also work with well-established forms of knowledge production that have become validated over generations. These structures can be refreshed and revitalised and maybe it is our mission to be at the avant-garde.

Steve Taylor asks in the final paragraph of his editorial, "what is the new horizon we are sailing towards?" If we take our compass bearing from Schumann, we may not need a fixed answer to that question. We simply need to stay true to our inspirations, take our artistic expressions, and "depart" from the safety of the shore.

Schumann drew inspiration from his guiding personalities to create, through stream-of-consciousness writing, a piano concerto that today is part of the concert pianist's repertoire and performed across the globe. There were risks for him and will be for us. However, in our departures we may find intriguing conversations, dialogues both with "kindred spirits" and people whose views differ from ours, creations that stretch our imaginations, and writings that move us beyond privileged forms.

And to the piano? What of it? My tuner says the instrument has grown in popularity since the Covid-19 pandemic because it provides a vehicle for people to enjoy making music together at home. It is returning to a focal point of family life, he says. Again, without pushing the analogy, our call is to make art within the confines of our profession and take the tools of our trade which may have become clunky and over-mechanised, and use them to produce artful, unpredictable, fecund scholarship.