Robert Schumann – Symphony No. 2 in C Major, Op. 61

Robert Schumann
Born June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Saxony, Germany.
Died July 29, 1856, Endenich, near Bonn, Germany.

Composition History
Schumann began this symphony in 1845 and completed it the following year. Felix Mendelssohn conducted the first performance on November 5, 1846, at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-four minutes.

Performance History
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Schumann’s Second Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on October 23 and 24, 1891, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on February 1, 2, and 3, 2007, with David Zinman conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 2, 1942, with Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting, and most recently on July 2, 2004, with Christoph von Dohnányi conducting.

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In August 1844, Robert Schumann suffered a severe breakdown. Medical reports seldom shed much light on works of art, but in Schumann’s case, his creative process was regularly dictated by his physical condition. His fragile life was marked by recurring melancholy and depression beginning as early as 1828. There were recurrences in October 1830, throughout 1831, and in the autumn of 1833, when he attempted suicide by leaping from his fourth-floor apartment window—his diary that year records his fear of going mad. There were other breakdowns in 1837, 1838, and 1839, but with the happiness of marriage to Clara Wieck in 1840, and the abundant, joyous outpouring of songs that year, it seemed that he had put his demons behind him, and that better times lay ahead.
But in 1842, Schumann collapsed from exhaustion and overwork. The worst time of all came in 1844: he couldn’t even listen to music—“which cut into my nerves as if with knives”—and he complained of a constant, debilitating ringing in his ears. He also suffered from trembling and from unreasonable fears of sharp metal objects and heights (doubtless the consequence of renting that fourth-floor apartment). When Robert and Clara went to Dresden that October, his nights were sleepless and sheer torture; Clara would awaken to find him “swimming in tears.” He wrote no music for a year—it took him weeks just to draft a letter. Eventually he began to study Bach systematically, and to try his own hand at some compositional exercises.

This C major symphony is the first large-scale piece Schumann wrote after his breakdown. For a composer who cut his teeth on piano pieces and songs, moved naturally into chamber music, and had only recently tackled writing for orchestra, this was a bold effort, perhaps even a test of the strength of his recuperation. Although we know it as Schumann’s second symphony, it follows an abandoned effort from 1832—attempted long before his confidence and talent worked in tandem—and several works dating from 1841: the Spring Symphony published as his first, the D minor symphony later revised and published as no. 4, and the beginnings of another symphony in C minor. Schumann took to the new medium with great enthusiasm, if not comparable experience: the Spring Symphony, for example, was sketched in four days and finished in less than a month.

The C major symphony didn’t go as quickly or easily, partly because Schumann was feeling his way back toward a full workload. Three years after finishing the music, he wrote to D. G. Otten, the music director in Hamburg:
I wrote my symphony in December 1845, and I sometimes fear my semi-invalid state can be divined from the music. I began to feel more myself when I wrote the last movement, and was certainly much better when I finished the whole work. All the same it reminds me of dark days.

Though Schumann did indeed write the symphony in a month, the orchestration took much longer. He began to score the first movement in February 1846 and didn’t finish it until early May. The work was completed the following October 19, just three weeks before Felix Mendelssohn conducted the first performance.

All of Schumann’s symphonies search for new light to shed on a familiar form. They are marked by innovation and experiment—and sometimes by a rather deliberate attempt to avoid comparison with the towering achievements of Beethoven. The D minor piece eventually published as his Symphony no. 4 is so daring and unconventional that Schumann thought of calling it a “symphonic fantasy,” sidestepping the issue altogether. All four published symphonies aim for unity by linking the movements through titles or thematic cross-reference.

The C major symphony begins with a moody slow introduction, the most obvious reminder of the composer’s dark days. More importantly, it provides the main theme and several subsidiary ideas for the ensuing Allegro ma non troppo as well as the brass fanfare that returns to crown the first three movements and to hover near the end of the symphony. Although the first movement itself is high in energy and emotion, Schumann chooses to follow it not with the accustomed calm of a slow movement, but with a virtuosic scherzo. And he thwarts expectations by giving us two independent trios, the first
genial in a rustic way, and the second, with its theme presented both upright and upside down, a reminder that it was Bach's music that led Schumann back to his desk.

Like Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony, Schumann has kept us waiting for the slow movement, and he does not disappoint. This is music of great beauty, written in C minor (the other three movements are in C major) and revitalized midway through by the beginnings of a fugue—another tip of the hat to Bach. Despite Schumann's claims of improved health, the finale has often troubled analysts; even Donald Tovey, normally rational though often outspoken, found it incoherent. It is mainly a question of proportion. It begins with great authority and confidence, and includes as its second theme a brilliant transformation of the principal melody from the Andante. The development and recapitulation merge, ending in C minor. Then follows a coda so long (half the movement's length) and remarkable that it nearly overshadows all that came before. It is based on a theme that is completely new to the symphony, though Schumann had used it before, in his Piano Fantasy, pointedly borrowing it from Beethoven's An die ferne Geliebte (To the distant beloved), where it accompanies the words “Take, then, these songs of mine.” By 1845 Schumann had married his own beloved, offering her some 121 songs in the year of their marriage alone, and so the reference is both loving and triumphant, a reminder that it was Clara who encouraged Robert to try writing for orchestra, wisely promising that “his imagination cannot find sufficient scope on the piano.”

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