

## Book Notes

Thomas Willis, Ph.D., Editor

**Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius** by Peter Ostwald (Northeastern University Press, 373 pages, \$28). What a tantalizing challenge is presented by the composer, Robert Schumann. Sir Thomas Beecham, one of the best Schumann interpreters, noted that he "accomplished the miraculous feat of clothing exquisite and delicate fancies in subtle and secret phrases that each one of us feels to have been devised for his own particular understanding." Stravinsky singled out a different dimension of his compositional colleague: "Schumann is the composer of childhood both because he created a children's imaginative world and because children learn some of their first music in his marvelous piano albums." To Brahms, Schumann's memory was holy: "The noble, pure artist forever remains my ideal. I will hardly be privileged ever to love a better person."

Those familiar with his writing—he was one of the first and one of the best music critics—as well as his music know this is only the beginning. Following the lead of the German romantic novelists, he mingled poetic fancy with artistic fact. Many of his comments are presented as conversations between imaginary companions—Florestan the brave improviser, battling Philistinism; Eusebius the shy, intuitive, and often melancholy child; and Raro, the rational harmonizer and integrator. The last named was synthesized, in true romantic fashion, from Clara and Robert, the Clara, of course, being his young, brilliant and artistic wife, the pianist and composer Clara Wieck.

Add to all this the best known facts of his biography—that he moved in the charmed circle of writers, performers and composers who were changing the aesthetic and artistic attitudes of

mid-century Europe, and that he died at the age of 46 in a mental institution—and you gain some idea of the temptation he presents to the biographer: choose your facts adroitly and you have a first-class romantic novel.

Peter Ostwald avoids this trap entirely. A professor of psychiatry at the University of California in San Francisco, he describes his goal precisely: "Genius and madness have often been thought to be related in some way. In the life of Robert Schumann it is particularly difficult to draw the line between the two. The problem of distinguishing between his creative and his psychotic behavior has confounded many biographers, musicologists, and psychiatrists. Thus far no single diagnosis has done justice to the facts. . . . A fresh look at (his) life, and particularly his recurring mental disorder, seems called for."

Fresh look, indeed. Dr. Ostwald has put the life of his subject under a scholarly electron microscope, examining the composer's life and compositional activity day by day from every available angle. He has gone to Germany, read the diaries and household books Schumann kept from age 17, reviewed all letters, autobiographical essays, unfinished novels, medical records, and legal documents. In his search for the causes of Schumann's illness, he even convinced the head of the Saxon State Library in Dresden to part with hair samples from Schumann, Schumann's father, and Clara!

The result is a wonderfully rich and detailed psychological case study, full of seldom-encountered, if not previously-unknown, facts. We learn, for example, that "Sexual intercourse and long walks seem to have been his most intense physical activities," that he marked an "F" in his diary every time

he had sexual intercourse, that "passionate feelings about attractive young men . . . had blossomed into romantic infatuations, and during his early twenties he had lived with a handsome young musician, Ludwig Schunke, until Schunke died."

We learn of his mercurial mood swings, of his frequently troubled public relationships with Brahms, Mendelssohn, Wagner, Chopin, Liszt, and other musicians and artists less well known today, and of the inexorable private struggle he carried on with the major affective disorder that troubled him from adolescence on. As Dr. Ostwald notes in the clinical diagnosis that ends the book, "He suffered from severe, recurring feelings of extreme sadness and irritability. Often he was sleepless, agitated and hopeless. . . . Imaginary voices would accuse him of crimes and tell him that his work was insufficient or worthless." He also went in the opposite direction, with episodes of manic excitement that "often resulted in creative overactivity. He would write or compose incessantly, sometimes for several days consecutively, sleeping very little and aware that his mind was racing. Music presented itself to his conscious mind with tremendous speed and intensity. But there would soon be another letdown in mood, with pathological sadness and physical exhaustion."

So far, Dr. Ostwald the psychiatrist and scholar. It remains to add the musician—he is a skilled violinist and an active chamber music performer. Schumann's music communicates with him and he writes of it with passionate eloquence: "There is something timeless and almost supernatural about the opening of Schumann's Cello Concerto. . . . The music is both outgoing and contemplative. Florestanian en-

ergy . . ." is followed by "Eusebian poetry." Such descriptions amplify his basic contention that, perhaps more often than in the case with other composers, Schumann's music reflects and responds to his state of mind.

In the end, the objective, though clearly compassionate, scientist wins out, summarizing the composer's "Highest Level of Adaptation Recently Achieved: . . . Schumann was a dreamer, a romantic tone-poet and writer whose inner voices were those of childhood, of wonder, of love, or turmoil, even of madness. Essentially a self-trained musician, he had used his prodigious talents to compose in great haste and voluminously, sometimes overstripping his resources. Fearing death, he immortalized himself through creative achievement, and he brought an end to his life through suicide."

**Tone Deaf and All Thumbs? An Invitation to Music-Making for Late Bloomers and Non-Prodigies** by Frank R. Wilson (Viking Penguin, 209 pages, \$15.95). Also a San Francisco medical man, Frank Wilson is a clinical neurologist at the University of California Medical Center. For all its trivializing title, *Tone Deaf and All Thumbs?* deals with important and interesting concerns. In addition to encouraging educated adults to consider music in their fitness programs and exploring the interconnections between brains, muscles, and the musical experience, the author hopes to "draw attention to the growing dialogue on human musicality among educators, musicians, and medical and behavioral scientists."

Wilson is just the man to encourage such dialogues. He is an elegant, witty, and persuasive writer who can bewitch as well as enlighten his readers. He can

write in clear, jargon-free, and consistently fascinating prose. He knows how to simplify without becoming simplistic or simple-minded, agreeing with Gertrude Stein's "I like a thing simple but it must be simple through complication. Everything must come into your scheme, otherwise you cannot achieve real simplicity." With conviction and skill he takes us through the systems and processes that entwine music and the human organism. His sense of humor and joy in the journey projects from every page.

This is not a "how-to" book that solicits your money by proposing simple answers. "Most important areas of human interest breed questions faster than answers. You can reasonably expect, therefore, to progress through the thoughtful literature on any serious topic with an increasing sense of amazement and mystification. You should also smell a ruse if something you read purports to give you the truth, or a final answer, about anything trickier than the preferred method to get through a revolving door." That being said, he proceeds to tell more about the amazing, astonishing physical and mental processes involved in music making than any book I have come across.

**The Art of Quartet Playing** by the Guarneri Quartet, in conversation with David Blum (Knopf, 247 pages, \$18.95). David Blum, a longtime friend of the Guarneri Quartet (Arnold Steinhardt, John Dalley, Michael Tree, and David Soyer), is that rarest of all interviewers, a man who knows nearly as much about the subjects to be discussed as the persons who provide the answers. He knows how to ask the interesting questions and keep on asking

until the answers sharpen into individual focus. He appreciates relevant quotations and anecdotes but knows better than to let them dominate a discussion. Best of all, he and his editors know that a book is meant to be read, not heard. The well-wrought play of minds exploring a challenging subject is much more interesting than a colloquial collection of speeches. Conversation the book certainly is, but it is conversation on a level unattainable in ordinary surroundings. Blum has been collecting his material for years and has assembled and polished it with a precision rivalling that of the composers and performers whose art he is probing.

The Guarneri has been together for more than two decades and its members are to a man articulate, intelligent, and well-read performer-teachers. The book breathes as befits its living subject. Each man speaks for himself, then addresses general and specific common concerns. Highly technical questions about pitch, vibrato, and bowing share pages with probing theoretical analysis and the mysterious "fifth presence" which unites everyone in rare, sublime moments of transcendence and transfiguration. Whenever words fail, a musical example (there are literally hundreds) is provided. The final chapter is devoted to a penetrating analysis of Beethoven's Opus 131 which comes literally alive at the conclusion with comments made offstage immediately following a performance.

*The Art of Quartet Playing* brilliantly celebrates string quartets and their repertory and provides an "Aha!" every page or so. In an age when oral history is decidedly risky, it sets a standard for the genre. If you love chamber music, ask for it for Christmas.

#### SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

Subscribe today to **Medical Problems of Performing Artists** and take advantage of the low introductory rates: \$36.00 for individuals, \$46.00 for institutions (U.S.). Mail the postpaid card in this issue to begin your subscription. If you already subscribe, why not give a whole year of MPPA to a friend or colleague? A special card will be sent to announce each gift. Call or write the publisher Hanley & Belfus, Inc., 210 S. 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107 (215) 546-7293. Subscriptions are available on a calendar-year basis only.