

Notes on *Das Paradies und die Peri*

Without question, Robert Schumann is the quintessential German Romantic composer, and *Das Paradies und die Peri* is one of the best examples of that same Romanticism I can think of. Schumann was born in Zwickau, the son of a bookseller and sometime author. Indeed, Schumann's own literary prowess and interest are no doubt directly related to his father's interest in literature. From his early years, Schumann dabbled in music, but seemed to consider himself principally a man of letters. Only later in his early student years in Leipzig, when law school seemed dull and uninteresting, did music become a more serious avocation. If one traces the chronology of Schumann's compositional output, it is clear that Schumann approached musical genres from miniature to monument, starting with the piano music of the 1830s. His marriage to Clara Wieck in 1840 inspired a concentrated and prolific period of art-song composition. Next came chamber music, quickly followed by his first large-scale works, the symphonies. Encouraged by the success of the symphonic literature, he began to consider the ultimate genre for the 19th Century German Romantic: opera. Because opera combined the highest of the arts, literature and music, there was much philosophizing about the marriage of the two. On one side of the spectrum, the greatest music was that which employed text; texted music alone had the greatest expressive capacity (e.g. the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony). On the other side, composers like Liszt were convinced that text limited music's capacity to evoke and express, and thereby qualified works for instruments only as the *absolute* in music. Of course, this discussion reached apotheosis in the works of Richard Wagner who created his own libretti and transformed opera music to unprecedented levels. Schumann was no stranger to the on-going discussion and, because of his literary interests, tended to side with the former. In fact, as an exhortation to his composition students in 1850, Schumann reminded them that the highest in art music is to be found in the combination of chorus and orchestra.

Schumann considered many sources for his new project but seemed unconvinced until a fortuitous meeting with his lifelong friend Emil Fleischsig in 1843. And although the subject of the Peri had occupied him from as early as 1841, composition did not begin until his visit with Fleischsig. In his day-book shortly before the visit, he writes, "Right now I am all in the mood for composing, and I wish I could come up with something really out of the ordinary. I am so attracted to the East, to the rose gardens of Persia, to the palm groves of India. I have a feeling that someone will bring me a subject that would lead me there." Upon receiving Fleischsig's translation Schumann declared, "The whole episode is a miracle - a manifestation of a sixth sense that detects invisible things in our proximity." Though Schumann probably originally set out to write an opera, the present oratorio was the product.

"Paradise and the Peri" is the second of four episodes in Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*. ("Lalla Rookh" means *tulip cheeks*, and refers to the Princess in the story.) Moore's story was all the rage at the time of its first publishing in 1817, requiring six printings in the first year alone. By 1842, *Lalla Rookh* was published in thirty different editions in English, as well as translations in seven languages. Schumann, ever the avid reader, was no doubt familiar with the 1822 translation. In the story, the beautiful Princess is traveling from Delhi to Kashmir to celebrate her marriage to the King of Bucharra. Along the tiring journey, the handsome Kashmirian poet Feramorz entertains the young princess with four fantastic tales, all in verse of course. In the end, Feramorz reveals that he is the King disguised as the poet. The second

tale concerns itself with the redemption story of a Peri's attempts to gain entrance to Heaven. A Peri is a kind of angel or elfin, descended from the union of a fallen angel and a mortal. Ethereal and perhaps even translucent, the winged Peris were said to have sustained themselves on scents and perfumes. Despite this fantastic beauty, their unfortunate lineage bars them from the entrance to Paradise. But hope is not lost, for, as the Angel reminds the Peri, "The Peri may yet be forgiven Who brings to this eternal gate The gift that is most dear to heaven!" Encouraged by her charge, the Peri sets off on a series of journeys taking her first to India, then Egypt, and finally Syria. After two unsuccessful attempts (the last drop of blood of a felled warrior, the final sigh of two lovers stricken by the plague), the repentant tear of a hardened criminal proves to be the gift most dear.

For Schumann, the text seemed absolutely perfect for musical setting: "It is simply made for music. The whole conception is so poetic and ideal that I was quite carried away by it." Upon completion, Schumann enthusiastically wrote to friends describing the *Peri* as a "new genre for the concert hall . . . The music is just long enough for an evening performance." From the start in February, the composition of the *Peri* seemed to preoccupy Schumann and nearly drain him. His wife Clara writes in her daybook, "[Robert] has already played me the first part from the sketch, and I think it's the most splendid thing he's done so far; but he's working with his whole body and soul, and with such intensity that I sometimes worry he might become ill." Upon completion of the final part in June, Schumann wrote to his friend Johannes Verhulst, "As I wrote *finis* on the last sheet of the score, I felt so thankful that my strength had been equal to the strain. A work of these dimensions is no light undertaking. I realize better now what it means to write a succession of them, such as, for instance, the eight operas which Mozart produced within so short a time."

The *Peri* marks a watershed event in Schumann's career. His first large scale work, it was the piece which inspired international fame and recognition. Schumann, mostly known as a regional composer and the able editor of his own music journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, was fast becoming a household name. *Das Paradies und die Peri* was performed more than 50 times in Schumann's lifetime and remained, along with the Spring Symphony, one of his most performed works. The *Peri* also signals a turning point in Schumann's lifelong journey in defining a new German music, in direct opposition to the faddish Italian and French operas of the day. Schumann sought to elevate German music to a higher place, to raise the secular to a level *en par* with the sacred. In an age when folklorism and historicism ruled the day, Schumann longed for "sacred" truths in secular art. In an age preoccupied with genre definitions, the *Peri* defies standard classifications. Schumann called the *Peri* a "dichtung" and "a new genre for the concert hall." It is, indeed, a departure from the standard biblically-based oratorios of the day. The work at times seems more closely related to Mendelssohn's extended cantata *Die Erste Walpurgisnacht* than *St. Paul*. Though at first glance the *Peri* is a secular subject, the point of the story is the classic German Romantic journey toward redemption, the search for the *absolute*. Add transfiguration and we have an opera (Faust, Tristan, etc). Schumann's attempts to "sanctify" the secular music of the concert hall led him to his next large-scaled work, and his only opera, *Genoveva* (1849) and later the Faust Scenes of the 1850s. *Genoveva* invokes the sacred in an entirely new way, not unlike Wagner's *Parsifal* of many years later. Schumann get closest to the sanctification of the concert hall in his Faust Scenes, drawing on Goethe's defining German story of Faust and the "eternal feminine" in a seemingly spiritually, if not religiously, motivated concert work of remarkable proportion. But the roots of this journey are found a decade earlier in the form of the *Peri*.

The *Peri* was immediately a popular success. “[In the *Peri*, Schumann] strives for truth and beauty, but distinguishes by clear, simple, generally accessible and understandable form. His largest work thus far affords the most pleasant proof . . . that even the most genuine work of art can and must be popular to a certain extent if it is to reach completely its high destiny . . . Melodies run through the whole work that are not only deeply and truly felt but also immediately and generally effective because of their simple formation and often skilled repetition.” (Johann Christian Lobe’s article in an 1847 issue of the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*)

One of the most important of the work’s many innovations, is the free-flowing through-composed nature of each of the three parts. You will not hear full cadences at the end of arias or choruses. Schumann goes to great pains to make a seamless texture from movement to movement. In response to one of the only negative reviews of the *Peri*, Schumann wrote, “You object to two aspects: the lack of recitatives and the connection, without breaks, of the musical sections. To me these are among the work’s advantages, representing formal innovation. It would have been good to have discussed this in your review.” Another innovation and an important inclusion is the distinctly German *lied*. Schumann included movements which develop just as a song, each verse using the same melody with some variation in the accompaniment. There is an important nod to contrapuntal textures though there are no fully developed fugues (the finale of Part I is closest). The finale of Part II, starts as a simple beautiful prayer, which, upon the entrance of the chorus, takes on a religious quality. After collecting the sinner’s tear in Part III, the chorus and solo quartet sing a sort of chorale, yet another invocation of the sacred.

One of the hallmark musical innovations of the middle Romantic style, is the *leitmotiv*, a development most often associated with Wagner’s compositions. Though Schumann’s use of musical motive is fairly limited in the *Peri*, the opening two bars serve as a motive of the *Peri*’s longing. They can be heard intermittently throughout the work and each time evoke the *Peri*’s plight. These ideas are more skillfully worked out in *Genoveva* where the motives used make up an organic core of the piece. (It is interesting to note that Wagner knew of the *Genoveva* score very well before the premiere of *Lohengrin* in 1849.) This unity at the micro-level carries through to the large-scale structure. Individual numbers evolve to their inevitable conclusions and finales of each part.

Schumann once described *Paradise and the Peri* as an “oratorio for happy people.” One of the marvelous and endearing qualities of the piece is that it is consistently sweet throughout, one gorgeous melody after the next. By the turn of the previous century, it had fallen out of favor, perhaps because of its simple optimism and idealism. German society at the time - the period before unification, and even before the failures of the 1848 revolution - remained largely untouched by Enlightenment values of popular sovereignty and free will of the people. These early Romantics found their voice not in politics, but in the arts, history and a budding sense of German nationalism. The growth and popularity of choral societies during this period is a direct reflection of this searching political aspiration expressed through artistic engagement. In Schumann’s day, the journey of German philosophical thought had only begun to absorb Hegel, Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* still far from consideration.

—Scott Allen Jarrett (2005; rev. 2010)

