

Subtlety of touch

Luiza Borac plays Schumann - and ROBERT ANDERSON listens



Between Op 13 and Op 15 Ernestine had finally been swapped for Clara. In 1838, when Schumann wrote the *Kinderszenen*, he claimed to have so pressing an urge for composition 'that even if I were cast on to a desert island in the middle of the ocean, I could not stop'. No need for Shakespeare or a bible, just reams of manuscript paper. In March he wrote to Clara about his latest effort: 'some thirty droll little things, from which I have selected a dozen or so and called *Kinderszenen*. You will enjoy them -- though you will have to forget that you are a virtuoso'. Schumann wrote that they were 'peaceful, tender and happy, like our future'. Clara responded that same March, as quoted in the liner notes: 'To whom have you dedicated your "Scenes"? I cannot imagine that they really belong to anybody else except us both, and I cannot get them out of my head. They are so simple, I feel so comfortable with them, and they are so completely you.' As published, the *Kinderszenen* have no dedication. Clara comments on many of the pieces: 'for instance in "The Pleading Child" you can imagine how the child pleads with his little hands folded together'

The *Etudes* are very different, virtuoso pieces of considerable intellectual power based on a theme by Ernestine's adopted father. Schumann was undecided about the work's title. Originally '12 Davidsbündler Studies', they became 'Symphonic Studies in orchestral character by Florestan and Eusebius', and then 'Studies in the form of Variations'. As in the case of the *Kinderszenen*, Schumann wrote more pieces than he published; five more appeared posthumously in the complete edition, edited by Brahms. Schumann knew the studies were not only formidable technically, but might prove a stumbling-block to contemporary audiences. He approved when Clara wrote in 1838 that she had not played them at any of her Viennese recitals: 'You did right not to play my *Etudes*. They are not suitable for public audiences, and it would be pitiful if I complained afterwards that they had not understood something which was in fact not intended to be applauded in that way but only existed for its own sake.' It is hard to say, though, how Etude 3 would not make instant appeal [[listen -- track 17, 0:00-0:50](#)]. The 'Presto possibile' of Etude 9 requires initially the lightest of touches, but its quicksilver moods

would keep any pianist at full stretch [[listen -- track 25, 0:00-0:39](#)]. Schumann very sensibly dedicated Op 13 to Sterndale Bennett, the first Englishman to give piano recitals in his native country.

One of Bernard Shaw's most engaging reviews involves the *Etudes symphoniques* and the first appearance of 'a wild young woman named Ilona Eibenschütz'. After 'stumbling hastily up the stairs, and rushing at the piano stool with a couple of strange gestures of grudging obeisance', Ilona seemed to Shaw to be 'friendless in a foreign land. But when she touched the first chord of Schumann's *Etudes Symphoniques*, the hand lay so evenly and sensitively on it, and the tone came so richly, that I at once perceived that I was wasting my sympathies, and that Ilona, however ingloriously she might go to the piano, would come away from it mistress of the situation'. She was, after all, a late pupil of Clara Schumann and acquaintance of Brahms. Luiza Borac can certainly produce Ilona's subtlety of touch, as for instance in No 4 of the Appendix variations printed by Brahms. If not all the studies have an equivalent sensitivity, the fault is partly Schumann's and that of the modern piano.

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Schumann: Kinderszenen - Etudes Symphoniques - Luiza Borac

GBEZL0200011-40 NEW RELEASE 57'43" 2002 Luiza Borac and John Barnes

Luiza Borac, piano

Robert Schumann: Kinderszenen Op 15; Etudes Symphoniques Op 13



That Luiza Borac has established a reputation as one of the finest interpreters of Enescu's piano music today is beyond doubt. Two impressive releases attest to that; but it would be a mistake to categorise her as 'just' an Enescu player. This disc shows why.

Kinderszenen opens with a delicately nuanced account of "About foreign lands and peoples", which does not overstretch the slight moments of hesitancy within the writing, as some pianists are tempted to do. The second scene's "curious story" is perhaps told in a little strait-laced a manner, as if to signify that actually the teller - Schumann, rather than Borac - finds it all a bit boring. The "catch me if you can" moment runs away with itself nicely, showing just how deftly Borac can

alter the mood. The upbeat mood continues through vignettes such as "Happiness" and "Knight of the Rocking Horse". The "important event" of the sixth movement conveys much through its relative grandeur of statement, just as the following scene, "Dreaming" relies on pianistic introspection for its effectiveness. Borac does us the favour of not overplaying the music, rather she leaves it with a slight fragility.

The mood of the moment dictates, almost by force, a pause before proceeding to the homely and distinctly German fireside scene. "Almost too serious" and "Frightening" initially seem cut from much the same compositional cloth, as in them both you can hear a child's wide-eyed sense of wonder at the world around him.

The child falls asleep in the penultimate scene through tiredness and "the child's eyes cannot be closed in a nicer way", according to Clara Wieck in a letter to Schumann. She commented too on the simplicity of the set and the growth of her delight as she played them. Much of their surface simplicity is evident in Borac's playing, as is delight in the music. A distinct strength is that she integrates the more famous scenes into the whole, rather than separating them out as focal points for attention. Above all though Borac is mindful of the underlying mood of seriousness that lurks within these short pieces. Just listen to the lofty thoughts expressed in the final scene, "The Poet Speaks".

Alternative versions of *Kinderszenen* are legion, most inferior by a mile when placed in comparison with that recorded by Clara Haskil (Philips). Haskil's own physical frailty seems to register all too readily through her playing, which achieves much through not distorting the work's structure. Lang Lang, in his recent recording for DG, proves less effective in my view because he seeks to make too much out of music that should just be played, and not subjected to over-conscious interpretation.

The *Etudes Symphoniques* comprises a set of sixteen studies and a finale, although their existence in this form took some time to transpire. Originally, twelve studies were written and published in various editions – of which the 1834 is most commonly adhered to – before Brahms and Clara Wieck released four further variations and the finale for posthumous publication. A major problem for any pianist is one of structure and overall shape of the piece in performance. However, given that even Schumann admitted much of the music was "pathos-laden" and that he tried "to break up whatever pathos there may be in them by using various colours [...] a different colour each time", the performer must also consider the subtleties of a nuanced palette too.

Borac, going by her recording, favours a sober balance of hues in the first half of the work, painted within a broad tempo range too. Yet the second half is more upbeat, starting with the sixth variation, which leads to a clearly articulated account of the seventh. Faster tempi continue to dominate much of the rest, even though the clarity could be helped by more distinct pedalling at times. Tonal balance is also important, and

Borac's Steinway model D grand has a soft, rich lower register which is usefully employed against the crystalline quality of the top range in appendix variation 5. Of much stronger stuff are the three remaining sections, with the finale proving notable for its grand sweep and sense of lyrical declamation.

Evan Dickerson, Musicweb