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The Poetic Horn: Rethinking Expressive Intent in Schumann's *Adagio und Allegro*, Op. 70

Robert Schumann's *Adagio und Allegro*, Op. 70 for horn and piano is seldom performed and even less frequently mentioned in academic discussion. The composer lived from 1810-1856, and even over 150 years later, scholars and critics have still found new ways to analyze, discuss, and hear his music. With all the time that has passed since its composition in 1849, however, the *Adagio und Allegro* has still received virtually no serious scholarly inquiry.

The small ensemble of horn and piano qualifies *Adagio und Allegro* as *Hausmusik*, any piece written for a small ensemble of amateur musicians to be performed for friends and family in a private, rather than public setting. During Schumann's day, this kind of music became very popular, and thus relatively lucrative for the composer to publish. The *Adagio und Allegro* was originally written for horn and piano, but Schumann also transcribed the horn part for violin, viola, or cello, as if to make the music as marketable as possible. Because this piece therefore seems to have been written for commercial intent, scholars have generally ignored it in their discussion of the artistic content of Schumann's musical output.

This gap in the scholarly literature may be remedied by applying some of the expert's ideas regarding meaning in Schumann's music to the *Adagio und Allegro*. Besides Schumann's unusual choice of instrumentation, Schumann's literary connection to author Jean Paul and his musical espousal of Romanticism all appear in the *Adagio und Allegro* and contribute to a depth of meaning in the piece that has yet to be recognized.

The first indication that Schumann may have actually intended some expressive meaning in his *Adagio und Allegro* is the fact that before it was transcribed for stringed instruments, it was

written for horn, and *valved* horn at that. Immediately preceding the valved horn in the timeline of the horn's development was the *Waldhorn*, literally the "forest horn", which itself descended from the signaling instrument used in mounted hunts. When Schumann composed *Adagio und Allegro*, the newer valved horn was still controversial and relatively unknown. Yet any attempt to play the piece on a *Waldhorn*, even crooked in any of the plausible keys, would have been met with a range of results varying from awkward, unmusical delivery to utter failure. Eldon Matlick in his dissertation provides a detailed discussion on why *Adagio und Allegro* must be played on a valved horn as the composer indicated.¹ Such a conclusion begs the question—Why would Schumann have used the new and specialized valved horn if he were marketing toward amateur musicians who wouldn't have been familiar with that instrument?

Perhaps Schumann's primary goal for the *Adagio und Allegro* was not so much marketability, then, as the expression of an idea. The composer's tendency to instill expressive poeticism in his music is well-explored in other pieces. Berthold Hoeckner in his article "Schumann and Romantic Distance", for example, discusses how the Romantic idea of distance filters from philosophy into literature and finally to Schumann's compositional decisions.² The German Romantics, Schumann and his literary inspiration Jean Paul among them, sought spiritual fulfillment in bridging the gap between the philosophically-distinct physical and spiritual worlds. For author Jean Paul, the idea of distance served as this bridge. He thought a musical tone fading into the distance was the ultimate Romantic image, for as the tone becomes physically inaudible, the human imagination might continue that tone on into infinity, the realm

¹ Eldon Matlick, "Robert Schumann and the horn: a study of the valved horn used in symphonic and solo works," PhD diss., Indiana University, 1997.

² Berthold Hoeckner, "Schumann and Romantic Distance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50, no. 1 (1997): 55-132, doi:10.2307/832063.

of the spiritual. In this way, music was to Jean Paul a potent means of blurring the line between the physical and spiritual worlds. He incorporated this idea into his novels, particularly, as Hoeckner points out, the concluding chapter of *Flegeljahre*, and Schumann then incorporated the idea into his music—*Papillons*, Op. 2 in Hoeckner’s examples.

In the ending of *Flegeljahre*, Jean Paul’s character Vult leaves his life, his brother, and his lost love behind as he walks away into the horizon, playing his flute as he goes. Schumann imitates the Romantic fading sound of Vult’s flute at the ending of *Papillons* by writing a chord whose constituent notes vanish one by one until the chord dissipates into a single solitary tone. This technique of representing distance in sound also appears in the *Adagio und Allegro*. The first section of the piece, the Adagio, ends with the horn floating for thirteen long beats on a single quiet note over a delicate rising gesture in the piano accompaniment (Figure 1). The solo part fades away into silence, just like Vult’s flute in Jean Paul’s *Flegeljahre*. This invocation of the Romantic philosophy of distance is another indication that Schumann intended his *Adagio und Allegro* to have some sort of poetic meaning.



Figure 1. The ending of the Adagio section of *Adagio und Allegro*, where the horn’s fading tone invokes distance.

The second section of the piece, the Allegro, contains even more unexplored Romantic imagery. Distance, so Hoeckner explains, comes in several different forms—“spatial distance in

landscape, temporal distance in recollection of the past, and personal distance in separation from the distant beloved”.³ Temporal distance, according to Laura Wahlfors in a chapter titled “How to Play the Music of Absence?”,⁴ shows up in Schumann’s *Kreisleriana*, Part 4 for piano. In it, Wahlfors points out numerous references to other music, most notably to Ludwig van Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 57, the “Appassionata”. But the reference to Beethoven is not an exact quotation. It is lower than Beethoven wrote it, and quieter, framed by fragmentary ideas that lack tonal and rhythmic center. As Wahlfors describes, it “seems to hover around an absent center”.⁵ This is not a quotation that brings Beethoven into the music—rather, it draws attention to his absence. “The music of the Appassionata in *Kreisleriana*’s music slowly oozes forth, indeed like a distant memory”.⁶ Through invocation of memory, Schumann has introduced the Romantic idea of temporal distance to his music.

That technique of presenting a reference outside the music in a de-centered way to invoke the distance of memory figures prominently in the second section of *Adagio und Allegro*. The reference in the first few measures of the allegro is to a hunting call, the style of melody associated with the ancestral hunting horn. Traditional hunting calls were often in a quick 6/8 meter and mostly triadic, outlining the pitches of a chord because the hunting horn could not play all the intermediary pitches of a scale. This kind of music showed up regularly in the *Waldhorn* parts of Classical-era and early Romantic music as a musical shorthand for the outdoors and nature, so it would have been immediately recognizable to Schumann’s audiences.

³ Berthold Hoeckner, "Schumann and Romantic Distance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50, no. 1 (1997): 56, doi:10.2307/832063.

⁴ Laura Wahlfors, "How to Play the Music of Absence? The Romantic Aesthetics of Longing in Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, Part 4," In *Silence and Absence in Literature and Music*, edited by Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart, 85-101, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016.

⁵ Wahlfors, “How to Play the Music of Absence?”, 85.

⁶ Wahlfors, 91.

still beautiful and entertaining music on any of the stringed instruments, and the adaptation is so natural that it would be hard to guess that the piece wasn't originally written for them, but the piece loses some of its depth of meaning. The hunting call, for example, becomes the stringed instrument mimicking a hunting horn—not an uncommon compositional practice, but therefore not particularly profound or original. But on the horn, the hunting call is the horn mimicking itself, or rather, its ancestry. This imitation creates poetic meaning, for it involves Schumann's invocation of memory and all of its Romantic philosophical connotations.

Finally, Schumann's expressive intent in *Adagio und Allegro* is further implied by the composer's use of a particular literary technique, again taken from the pages of his favorite author, Jean Paul. Erika Reiman in her book, *Schumann's Piano Cycles and the Novels of Jean Paul*, identifies several characteristic techniques that define Jean Paul's writing style. They are *Witz*, "partial sameness masked by a greater difference", *Scharfsinn*, "partial difference hidden by a greater sameness", and *Tiefsinn*, "complete identity despite all appearances".⁷ Given the context of horn history and the dominance of the *Waldhorn* over valved horn during Schumann's life, it may be that Schumann was invoking Jean Paul's *Scharfsinn* in writing his *Adagio und Allegro* for valved horn. Though the tone of this newer instrument might be slightly different from that of the *Waldhorn*, especially with the loss of the muffled characteristic of some of its notes, Schumann uses *Scharfsinn* to demonstrate that overall the valved horn is still a worthy successor to the venerated hunting horn tradition.

Schumann may have invoked distance and memory to imply a new beginning in the development of the horn, but also to place the *Waldhorn* in the past, where it could be celebrated

⁷ Erika Reiman, *Schumann's Piano Cycles and the Novels of Jean Paul*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press (2004), 16.

and honored. Listening to the sparkling and boisterous ending of the *Adagio und Allegro* produces the impression that this use of memory is no lamentation for traditions lost. The conclusion of the piece features a high, soaring proclamation and brilliant hunting calls integrated into lyrical, upward-aiming melodies. Far more than a piece of commercial music, Schumann's *Adagio und Allegro* uses several of the composer's acknowledged poetic techniques to comment on tradition and progress, instilling new meaning in the sound of the horn. The music leans on the horn's past traditions to triumphantly herald a bold expressive future, suggesting that progress can be a celebration, rather than a rejection, of history and heritage.

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