
Schumann
CHANGES
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Jimin Oh-Havenith

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Thème sur le nom Abegg varié pour le pianoforte, Op. 1 'Abegg Variations'

Tema. Animato 0:49
Var. 1 0:57
Var. 2 1:01
Var. 3 1:06
Cantabile 1:44
Finale alla Fantasia 2:44

XII Études symphoniques, Op. 13 'Symphonic Etudes'

Andante 1:47
Etude 1. Un poco più vivo 1:24
Etude 2 3:10
Etude 3. Vivace 1:31
Etude 4 1:07
Etude 5 1:32
Etude 6. Agitato 1:03
Etude 7. Allegro molto 1:28
Etude 8 2:40
Etude 9. Presto possibile 0:48
Etude 10 1:27
Etude 11 1:52
Etude 12. Allegro brillante 7:50

XII Études symphoniques, Op. 13 Appendix (posthumous variations 1-5) *12:23*

Theme and Variations, WoO 24 'Ghost Variations'

Tema. Leise, innig 2:40
Var. 1 2:00
Var. 2. Canonisch 2:28
Var. 3. Etwas belebter 2:16
Var. 4 2:37
Var. 5 2:13

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Jimin Oh-Havenith plays
Robert Schumann, Vol. 4

Variations occupy a prominent place in Robert Schumann's piano œuvre. His very first published composition, the *Abegg Variations* of 1830, belongs to this genre, as does his last completed work, *Theme with Variations in E-flat Major* (the so-called 'Ghost Variations') from the winter of 1854. In between, Schumann returned to the variation form three more times in his piano music: in 1833 with the *Impromptus*, Op. 5, based on a romance by Clara Wieck; in 1835 with the *Symphonic Etudes*, Op. 13, published two years later; and in 1843 with the *Andante and Variations for Two Pianos*, Op. 46. Schumann's engagement with this form was motivated by several factors. On one hand, it was closely linked to the development of piano music itself; on the other, it reflected Schumann's early-established aesthetic and poetic worldview. Perhaps the most personal motivation was biographical: in early Romantic thought, the artist himself was considered the greatest work of art. The piano variation had, through Beethoven, risen to a genre standing on an equal footing with the sonata, combining the presentation of virtuosic skill with the demonstration of innovative compositional ideas. In his Variations, Op. 34, Beethoven first exemplified the principle of "developing variation", where each new variation takes up the substance of its predecessor, moving ever further from the original theme. For Schumann, variation was simultaneously a play of masks – or *larvae*, as the contemporary term for carnival disguises went – allowing more or less veiled allusions to his own life, especially his intense and complex relationships with women. Such allusions could be conveyed through dedications or through the use of music associated with a beloved person, most notably Clara Wieck, his future wife. Themes from Clara's piano compositions provided the starting point for Op. 5, the *Davidsbündlertänze*, Op. 6, the first movement of the F-sharp minor Piano Sonata, Op. 11, and the variation movement of the Second Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 14; indeed, the First Sonata, Op. 11, was dedicated to her. Op. 13, by contrast, is based on a theme by a musical amateur, the Bohemian Baron Ignaz von Fricken. He was the guardian of Ernestine von Fricken (1816–1844), a pupil of Schumann's piano teacher and later father-in-law, Friedrich Wieck. Schumann and Fricken became secretly engaged in 1834, and Schumann dedicated not only his *Allegro*, Op. 8, to her but also conceived the *Carnaval*, Op. 9, as a homage. The sequence of notes A–S ["Es" in German = E flat] –C–H [German designation for B], on which the work is built, simultaneously spells the name of her Bohemian hometown, Asch (today Aš); Ernestine von Fricken is portrayed in No. 13 as "Estrella." Here, as elsewhere in his œuvre, reality and fiction intertwine in variations on the relationship between art and life – a central preoccupation of the Romantic thinker and intellectual, Robert Schumann.

Proudly, Schumann commented on the publication of his *Opus Primum*, the *Variations on the Name "Abegg"*, Op. 1, in his diary in November 1831: "Today I appear for the first time in the great world with my Variations!" Originally, he had intended to compose a set of variations for piano and orchestra, inspired by Ignaz Moscheles' *Grandes variations sur un thème militaire, La marche d'Alexandre* of 1814. The nine-year-old Schumann first encountered the virtuoso pianist – admired by Beethoven and also Mendelssohn Bartholdy's mentor – at a concert in Karlsbad. (The extent of his admiration for Moscheles is evidenced by the dedication of Schumann's Second Piano Sonata, F minor, Op. 14, published in 1836, to him.) By 1829, Schumann was already pianistically accomplished enough to perform the *Alexander Variations* publicly, and Wieck wrote to his mother that he wished to train him into "a pianist who shall play more intelligently and warmly than Moscheles, and more magnificently than Hummel." A second model was Chopin's *Variations on "Reich mir die Hand, mein Leben"* from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Op. 2, which Wieck had drawn to his attention; Schumann wrote in 1831 an equally enthusiastic and literarily original review of this work. Of the at least six variations Schumann sketched, he ultimately realised only four. All the more striking is the theme, which plunges directly into the work without a preceding slow introduction – and which is, strictly speaking, hardly a theme at all. It consists of just five notes, derived from the surname of Schumann's Heidelberg acquaintance Meta Abegg, the daughter of a merchant, whom he ennobled in the playful dedication as the fictional "Countess Pauline von Abegg". Embedded in a waltz-like $^{3}/_{4}$ metre, the theme initially rises in octaves over a powerful, primitive chordal accompaniment in its original pitch (A–B♭–E–G–G). It is then sequenced in four-bar blocks, mirrored (G–G–E–B♭–A), and, through further variations, returns to the home key of F major. Formally, the theme is rigorously fitted into the structure of a classical period, with antecedent and consequent phrases of 2×16 and 4×8 bars respectively, yet its fragmentary character requires constant modification. Thus, the fixed period structure and the intrinsic musical dynamics of the material create a balance of persistent and fleeting forces, characteristic of Schumann. The adaptation of Moscheles' brilliant pianistic style is evident in the third variation and the

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ensuing rhapsodic finale, yet the differences in compositional thinking are equally striking. They are immediately apparent in the first two variations, which isolate the opening semitone step A–B♭: in the first variation, this leads to a dense chromatic texture of sequences; in the second, to a chromatic line accompanied by a continual blurring of the metric order. This principle of "metric dissonance" was henceforth elevated by Schumann into a hallmark of his piano writing – one that many pianists still regard with trepidation.

When the twelve *Symphonic Etudes*, Op. 13, which Schumann dedicated to his friend, the English composer William Sterndale Bennett, were published in 1837 by the Viennese firm Haslinger, Schumann's liaison with Ernestine von Fricken had already ended. He had composed the work – which initially bore the title *Variations pathétiques* or *Études in the Orchestral Character of Florestan and Eusebius* – mainly between September 1834 and January 1835; he may have added a few more études in September 1836. In the second version, published by Schumann in 1852, the adjective "symphonic" was omitted from the title; instead, it appeared as *Études en forme des variations*, and for this reason numbers 3 and 9 were left out, as they bore no connection to the theme. Five variations that Schumann had not included in 1837 were posthumously published by Johannes Brahms in 1890. For her recording, Jimin Oh-Havenith has chosen the text of the 1837 first edition, supplemented by these five additional numbers. Following the six *Studies after Caprices by Paganini*, Op. 3 (1832), and the *Toccata*, Op. 7 (1833), the *Symphonic Etudes* are arguably Schumann's most technically demanding piano works. At times, they require the performer to attempt the virtually impossible: for instance, in the eleventh étude, two widely separated voices in the right hand must intertwine canonically over a continuously pianissimo chromatic bass tremolo in the left hand. (This bass figure may have inspired Schumann admirer Maurice Ravel at the opening of "Ondine" in his *Gaspard de la nuit*, though there in the right hand and with an asymmetrical repetition.) Yet, as with Chopin's Etudes, Op. 10 – which Schumann, of course, knew – the virtuosity always serves a compositional imagination: the work traverses, almost dreamlike, the stylistic and sonic worlds of Paganini (No. 3), Liszt (No. 6), Bach (No. 8), and Mendelssohn Bartholdy (No. 9), while its march-like rhythmic energy repeatedly evokes Beethoven. On 1 August 1834, Friedrich Wieck wrote to Baron von Fricken not only of the "great affection" between Ernestine and Robert but also characterised Schumann in a manner we recognise in the *Symphonic Etudes*: "How much would I have to write to describe more closely this somewhat capricious, stubborn, yet noble, magnificent, ardent, highly gifted composer and writer, intellectually trained to the deepest degree!"

Nearly two decades later came the so-called *Ghost Variations*, WoO 24, following the publication of Schumann's final work, the *Gesänge der Frühe* ("Songs of the Morning"), Op. 133, dedicated to Bettina von Arnim. The variations were composed in February 1854, in immediate temporal proximity to Schumann's suicide attempt. Clara Schumann, to whom the work is dedicated, recorded in her diary: "On the night of 17 to 18 February, Robert kept rising to write a theme, which the spirits of Schubert and Mendelssohn sang to him, and upon which he created for me variations both touching and deeply moving." On Shrove Tuesday, 27 February 1854, Schumann leapt from a bridge in the Düsseldorf district of Oberkassel into the Rhine, was rescued, and subsequently returned home. The completion of the variations may have occurred as early as the following day. The composer Aribert Reimann, who took up and reworked the theme in his *Seven Fragments for Orchestra* in 1998, therefore suggested that the fifth and final variation, due to its conspicuously divergent compositional style, may indeed have been created on that day, marking a profound caesura. The simplicity of the chorale-like theme, set in the solemn, even Trinitarian key of E-flat major, was perceived by Brahms as an address from "a genius, friendly to us even in flight." The repetition of the second half of each variation produces a contemplative atmosphere reminiscent of late Schubert, while the latent – and in the second, canonic variation, explicit – polyphony seems to bow before the genius of Mendelssohn Bartholdy, who had died six years earlier, and, by extension, before the genius of Bach. While the melody remains clearly discernible in the first three variations, it dissolves in the final one. Its spiderweb-like texture, oscillating enigmatically between stasis and motion, combined with a dynamic reduced throughout to *piano*, recalls the *Arietta* of Beethoven's final Piano Sonata, Op. 111 – one of the most sublime concluding statements in the history of music, conceived as a set of variations. There is no turning back to the delightfully intricate masquerade that the young Schumann so loved, and to which we owe such masterpieces as the *Abegg Variations* and the *Symphonic Etudes*.

Wolfgang Rathert
Translation: *audite*

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JIMIN OH-HAVENITH

An exceptional sonority and fidelity owed to the text determine Jimin Oh-Havenith's piano playing. Her warm sound, which is always embedded within the rhythmic structure, lets music come alive in all its richness. Synchronicity of sound and rhythm, not arbitrary changes in tempo and dynamics determine the clarity of her interpretation.

Jimin Oh-Havenith was born in Seoul, South Korea. After studying piano with Jin-Woo Chung (Seoul National University) and Aloys Kontarsky (Musikhochschule Köln) she performed as a soloist and recorded for radio and CD, also as a piano duo with her late husband Raymund Havenith (†1993). The pianist taught at the Hochschule für Musik Mainz and the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Frankfurt am Main.

Since 2013 she has been active again as a soloist and has recorded twelve solo CDs.

recording: October 27 - 31, 2025
recording location: Konzerthaus Liebfrauen, Wernigerode
recording format: pcm, 96 kHz / 24 bit
recording producer / editing: Dipl.-Tonmeister Justus Beyer
executive producer: Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff
piano: Bösendorfer 280 (Gerd Finkenstein)
photos: Uwe Arens
pictures:
cover: Fabian Fußer (after a contemporary portrait based on Joseph Kriehuber's Schumann lithograph)
p. 3: miniature (photo: © Fabian Fußer)
p. 5: portrait (photo: © Fabian Fußer)
p. 7: lithograph by Joseph Kriehuber, Vienna 1839
art direction & design: AB·Design, Detmold

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info@audite.de · audite.de