

# Subjective Appropriation of Musical Form in Schumann's Carnival, Op. 9

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to analyze musical form in German composer Robert Schumann's works (8 June 1810 – 29 July 1856), particularly that of piano solo piece Carnival, op. 9, trying to understand what is revealed by the way he uses it in relation to his personality, not only in artistic terms (taking into account the context of German Romanticism) but also on a deeper psychological level. To come to an understanding of Schumann's use of form, this paper begins with a brief description of the evolution of musical form since Viennese Classicism, with additional references to the baroque system of 'affects'. Form in Schumann is compared with that of other significant composers of the romantic period and various points of intersection between music and other arts are analyzed, especially literature, in certain key works of this period. Parting from these reflections, we explore the question of the expressive intention behind his handling of form in Carnival, op. 9. The aim of the investigation of this aspect is to understand how far the innovative use of this parameter in Schumann, reflects a unique vision of the art of music.

## **KEYWORDS**

Musical form; Romantic period; Robert Schumann; Jean Paul; Carnival, op. 9; Subjective appropriation of musical form.

## **1 | INTRODUCTION**

Robert Schumann uses musical form in an extremely innovative and original manner, not only in relation to the canons of Viennese classicism, but also in relation to other outstanding figures of musical romanticism. By establishing an unparalleled link with the German-speaking poets of the period (such as Jean Paul), he would appear to 'appropriate' narrative techniques previously belonging exclusively to the realm of literature, distancing himself definitively from the traditional formal logic of musical form, still very present in composers that were his contemporaries.

Can we, therefore, in the context of Schumann's piano works, speak of dissolution of form, as it was conceived in the period of Viennese Classicism – form as a structure of an essentially dialectical nature (Paddison, 1993) – or of a reinvention of this concept?

During the course of this article, I will be looking for an answer to this question, by means of an analysis of the specific case of Carnival, op. 9.

## **2 | METHODOLOGY**

My purpose with this article is to try to define, focusing on the case of Schumann's piano music work Carnival, op. 9, 'musical form' – "the overall structure or plan of a piece of music" (Schmidt-Jones, 2011, p.79) – within the composer's personal universe, through a constant use of analogy with the poetry of Jean Paul, whom he so greatly admired.

I reflect by a psychoanalytical perspective, associating artistic creation with idiosyncratic personality traits in the way Karl Jaspers does (Jaspers, 2001), underpinned by existing bibliography in this area and by making use of my own 'intuitive logic' - Einstein, cited by Suzuki (1969) often made reference to a kind of entity called "intuitive thought", strictly related with the perception of music which, allegedly, drove him to the discovery of the Theory of Relativity: *"The theory of relativity occurred to me by intuition, and music is the driving force behind this intuition... My new discovery is the result of musical perception"* (Suzuki, 1969, p.90).

Firstly, I make a kind of chronological summary of musical form between the second half of the eighteenth century and the second half of the nineteenth century, to contextualize the development of the concept through music history, carrying out a synthetic analysis (by an aesthetically fundamented perspective) of this aspect of composition, comparing the use that various composers have made of form at different times, through certain examples of representative key works.

Then, I try to understand "musical form" in Schumann's work "Carnaval", op. 9, comparing the perspectives of musical analysis and psychiatry.

### **3 | EVOLUTION OF MUSICAL FORM FROM VIENNESE CLASSICISM TO GERMANIC ROMANTICISM**

During the period of Viennese classicism, the concept of absolute music, music that "has no subject beyond the combinations of notes we hear", music that "speaks nothing but sound" as was said by Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904) cited by Sandberger (1996), was affirmed definitively in all its splendour. Music as art did not depend on any extra-musical meaning associated with it, such as a theme, a narrative, a myth, suggested by the title or by some additional programmatic text.

On the one hand, this association was completely useless since, in reality, it was not possible to establish a direct, unequivocal relationship between music and some other language (most often literary), that is to say there was no way of proving that the one generated the other - probably both of them have their origin in the same generative structures (Chomsky, 1970). On the other, at this period, any

association of this kind began to be seen as undesirable, since it could sully the true essence of the musical object. The truth is that it is not really possible to establish a parallel between sounds and the morphology or syntax of other languages - "music certainly has no truth conditions" (Antovic, 2004, p. 10).

With music detaching itself from any kind of dependency in terms of meaning, as it existed in the baroque period with the system of 'affects' - which related each harmony with a specific expressive mood (Rameau, 2009) - the need to identify the origin of meaning in music began to emerge with ever greater clarity. The response lay in the development and perfecting of abstract forms such as sonata form, a kind of "essentially rhetorical motivated" form which is a great example of music where sound speaks for itself (Sly, 2009). In sonata form, for example, the dialectic produced between contrasting themes generates a structure that, so-to-speak, is meaningful unto itself (Hanslick, 1973). It is the method that embodies the meaning, the logical process that bestows the piece of music with a creative dynamic of its own sense. When we ask what a particular sonata of a classical composer 'means', the most correct answer is likely to be that 'it means a sonata form'. It should be remembered that in most cases the titles that appear associated with certain sonatas and symphonies were not originally the composer's but the publisher's, as a 'marketing' strategy, or arose through oral tradition, some time after the composition of the piece of music - for example, many of the titles by which certain of the best known of Beethoven's sonatas are known only arose many years after the composer's death, suggesting connotations, for example, with Schiller's work (Brisson, 2005).

What this implies is a natural emotional distancing from the composer himself in relation to the work produced. If we try to understand the source of inspiration to compose in the case of composers such as Mozart, we may say that it came from the technical mastery of the composition itself, from the mastery of the construction of the musical structures. In principle, the form had no meaning in itself, but rather this was constructed and revealed to the extent that the form developed. The real meaning of the musical piece isn't linked with the melodies or themes, but rather with the

process by which they give birth to the central idea of the piece – thesis, antithesis, synthesis (Hegel, 1988).

Robert Schumann (1810-1856), like all composers of the romantic period, began to break this pattern, before all-else by giving titles to pieces of the piano solo repertoire. In Germanic Romanticism, the need to express the individual 'self' began to lead to the gradual abandonment of the concept of absolute music. With increasing frequency, composers began to use forms that permitted greater freedom of expression, such as the fantasia or the prelude, at the expense of the forms that structured and governed the thematic and harmonic development of pieces more rigidly, such as sonata form. In other words, in the romantic period 'each creator creates his form' (Beaufils, 1979, p. 45).

Indeed, the fantasia, for example, is not, in a sense, a form, but a non-form, a free piece, 'formless', which can develop in correspondence with the spontaneous flow of the melodic shape and the harmonic progressions - something that can go "*from the freely improvisatory to the strictly contrapuntal, and also encompasses more or less standard sectional forms*" (Field, 2001). Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) composed a number of pieces in the genres referred to above but he went still further, adopting the polonaise and the mazurka, which bore a more personal stamp by association with the composer's own country, Poland (Gorbaty, 1986) as well as the ballade – he wrote four in all, and though he insisted that they had no extra-musical connotation, to this day there is speculation as to possible associations with Polish legends since the term 'ballad' relates to a mediaeval oral narrative genre (Zakrewska, 1999).

Liszt's symphonic poems, for example, openly have a connection with a specific narrative: "*they are concerned with descriptive subjects taken from classical mythology, romantic literature, from contemporary history and from imaginative fantasy*" (Kennedy, 1994, p. 553). Another of the great exponents of this genre is Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) in the *Symphonie fantastique*. Here, forms that still have more or less classical roots are associated with narratives or myths that symbolically permit an expression of their creator's 'self'.

Schumann, however, did not limit himself to this formula but dared to go beyond. In works of his maturity, like *Kreisleriana*, op. 16, for piano, composed in 1838, he set aside all forms of symbolism of this kind in order to build solely in terms that described his own emotional states.

In *Carnaval*, op. 9, also for solo piano (1834/35), the composer does not use titles that allude directly to emotions. However, unlike some of the pieces by other composers already mentioned, he creates characters that no longer belong to a universal mythological universe, but to a fictional universe that he himself created (Eckerty, 2008).

If *Mazeppa*, of the symphonic poem by Franz Liszt (1811-1886), is the hero of a legend, Eusebius, the personification of the naive and introvert side of Schumann, present in *Carnaval*, op. 9, as the fifth piece of the whole work, is a heteronym of the composer himself (Schonberg, 1997). Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) wrought an ode to Poland's struggle for independence through his music. Schumann, in *Carnaval*, op. 9, echoes this in the struggle of the 'Davidsbündler' against the Philistines (the 'league of friends of David', which he invented).

As I have already stated, the music of the classical period is valid for its form alone. In the romantic period, in some cases, form is not enough. The music is not sufficient on its own account, but needs to express some extra-musical content (Kennedy, 1994). The limits of form should be broken in the name of the free expression of the creator or subordinated to a literary content. Even in cases where the form does not appear excessively altered, the two dimensions, music and the extra-musical content associated, can no longer be separated, it being the latter that molds and transforms the former, in accordance with its specific requirements.

To give a concrete example, Liszt's *Sonata in B minor*, though it may certainly be considered to be an innovative work, nevertheless presents contrasting themes that are developed in a dialectic relationship in the course of the work, just as occurs in any sonata. However, these are not just sonata-form themes, they are the themes of Faust and Mephistopheles, among others – the sonata has a thematic relationship with the *Faust Symphony*, of 1854 (Walker, 1989). Let us

say that the form continues to function in the traditional manner, but the dialectic interplay is no longer limited to being a purely abstract exercise; rather, it is applied to a structure that aims to evoke a literary narrative.

#### 4 | REINVENTION OF MUSICAL FORM IN SCHUMANN

Schumann reinvented form, making a completely different use of it from that referred to in the previous example. In most cases, form no longer has as great a weight as a narrative (or poetic/expressive content, to be more precise). Form ceases to play a leading role: 'here on its route music finds, perhaps, a few too many extra-musical elements' (Beaufils, 1979, p. 45).

In *Carnaval*, op. 9, many of the pieces (in fact, most of them, except "Préambule", "Réplique", "Sphinxes", "Chopin" and "Marche des Davidsbündler contre les Philistins") have an ABA form (even "Eusebius" and "Florestan", that present a developed type of ABA) but this, instead of developing as a form, is applied as a formula. What is really important is the way the musical gesture illustrates the character or situation to which the title alludes. A particularly significant example is the piece 'Reconnaissance'. The title alludes supposedly to a fleeting romantic encounter at a Carnival ball with the notes repeated by the thumb representing the "throbbing of the lovers' hearts" (Reiman, 2004, p. 107). The 'formula' that Schumann felt best illustrated this picture was a polka that uses an ABA structure. The two aspects, form and symbolic content, do not unfurl in parallel (there's nothing in the ABA structure or in any pre-defined abstract form that we can directly connect with a narrative of this kind). In my point of view, it is the symbolic contents that define the choice of form to use, not because of the objective way in which it develops, but because of the subjective character that may be associated with it; not because a polka is constructed in a form similar to the narrative of an amorous encounter, but because a polka, by virtue of its rhythm, articulation and texture, possesses a spirit that might take us (metaphorically speaking) to an image of a picture of this kind, referring specifically to the very rapidly-repeated staccato notes, described as typical from "Polka" form by A. Blatter, which we may find underlying this dance (Blatter, 2007). It is music/poetry (it alludes to a specific subject through expressive marks as articulation and dynamics), not

music/prose or, by other words, music that tells a story through formal structure).

This is not, however, the same as poetic music. Chopin's nocturnes are, in my view, poetic music, thanks to the way that the shape and rhythmic freedom of the melody invariably appeal to the subjective expression of the performer's emotions. Schumann's music is not an example of free exercise in melodic lyricism on an abstract level. Chopin's nocturnes are like poems without a title. The pieces in *Carnaval*, op. 9, have very objective titles and are peopled with unforeseen events with obvious connections to narrative processes – 'defamiliarization', 'digression', 'intertextuality' and 'refocalization' (Reiman, 2004, p. 123). 'Florestan', for example, is a piece full of moments that can be interpreted as reminiscences in the literary sense of the term. Thus, if Schumann, as is likely, thought of an ABA form as a basis for the composition of the piece, he will only have kept it at the back of his mind as an underlying formula, as a guide. The proof that it does not have a determining role in the narrative structure is that it can be altered with the greatest ease in the light of events of an imagined extra-musical plane. What was an ABA structure ceases to be so through the simple insertion of what may be compared, through recourse to an image of a literary type, to the recollection of a past fictional situation.

According to Marcel Beaufils, Schumann's real ambition was to transfer to music the fantastic stories of Jean Paul, a poet baptized with the name Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (Beaufils, 1979). Thus, he did not strictly need a great architectural structure of a 'Beethovenian' kind, in order to construct a coherent musical discourse.

Again according to Beaufils, throughout his productive life, Schumann constantly hesitated between composing through a succession of instantaneous impulses and trying to tackle 'great forms' (Beaufils, 1979). For the composer, the process of composition used was more one of 'improvisations on a rhythm', alluding to traditional forms, with a certain irony (Beaufils, 1979).

But, in my view, this is not a matter of indecision properly speaking. Irrespective of his veneration for literary structures above all others, there was a real

purpose in composing according to predefined models. Schumann idealized a poetic music, that might express the language of the soul – thus he wrote in a letter to Clara Schumann, dated 24 January 1839, that the romantic does not reside in figures and forms and that the composer is a poet (Floros, 1981).

In fact, the adoption of classical forms like sonata form or fugue, for example, more often than not had a kind of underlying ‘authorial commentary’ (Reiman, 2004, p. 117) that transmitted the composer’s subjective vision, at one moment ironic, at another compassionate, in relation to the work that he was composing at the moment. This may easily be felt when, for example, Schumann associates a form as solemn as the ‘overture’, which he designates as ‘Préambule’, with a title like *Carnaval* – ‘romantic irony’ (Solaun, 2011).

However, it does not seem to me that we can state categorically that his aim, of composing according to the rules in force, was not a firm one. I think it might be more reasonable to say that form often ends up by being diluted – form as it was conceived at the period of Viennese classicism, with a pre-defined route before starting, built from the dialectical relationship between opposing themes (Viana, 2009). This dissolution of form, ultimately, gives way to the ‘instantaneous impulses’ (Barthes, 1979, p. 12) that Beaufils refers to as Schumann’s natural tendency, since its use is not based on the dialectic type of motivation that lay behind the great compositions of the classical period – according to Roland Barthes ‘Schumann lacks conflict’ (Barthes, 1979, p. 15). His motivation lies rather in the desire to express the inner world of the creator. Form begins by being a convention; then it becomes a poetic object, when it is superimposed on the composer’s subjective vision; and it ends by becoming an accessory from which to free itself, to give space to its creative freedom.

To clarify this question, let us turn to another example, the ‘*Marche des Davidsbündler contre les Philistins*’, the final piece of *Carnaval*, op. 9, which has an underlying sonata form. In this instance, it is not a sonata form in which the themes enter into dialogue at the rhythm of the dialectic development of a structured narrative. The narrative is not one in the traditional sense of the term, but is more like a picture that tries ‘impressionistically’ to capture the

sensations of the poet/composer. The musical structure follows all these ups and downs and hence, in truth, can be defined as a free form. It has more the appearance than the functional reality of sonata form. The piece does not develop like sonata form, but rather alludes to it through certain stereotypes associated with it, for the use of sonata form here is, essentially, an allegory of the musical tradition and conservative attitudes represented by the ‘philistins’. ‘Invasions’ by quotations from the ‘Préambule’ destroy the triumphal opening of the procession in which march various members of the ‘*Davidsbündler*’ – as we have already seen, Schumann belonged to a generation that brought into question the forms inherited from classicism, the ‘musical struggle’ being a metaphor for this aesthetic conflict (Beaufils, 1979). In brief, what is at issue is the subjective meaning, the expressive/affective connotation that Schumann bestows on a sonata form – on what is no longer in itself sonata form, but as an element of a poetic symbology (Reiman, 2004, p. 118). According to Schnebel, Schumann, unlike Beethoven, did not extract his composition from structure; he integrated his own corporeal realization in the composition: he composed to the very tips of his fingers – for him composition was an event of human experience (Schnebel, 1981). Reiman uses the term ‘defamiliarization’ (Reiman, 2004) with reference to situations in which characteristic signals and divisions of a determined form are reassessed and given a new meaning.

In *Carnaval*, op. 9, ‘Eusebius’ and ‘Florestan’ are heteronyms of Schumann’s. Titles like ‘Pierrot’ and ‘Arlequin’, as well as ‘Pantalon et Colombine’, allude to the *commedia dell’arte* characters who, in truth, may function hypothetically as a symbolic representation of real figures from ‘Schumann’s’ universe. ‘Chiarina’ or ‘Estrella’ concern the women that were part of Schumann’s life, but, on a deeper level, they are actually projections of the sentiments that the composer felt in relation to them – they are not really Clara Wieck and Ernestine von Fricken, but mental representations that Schumann had of them, and, as a consequence, a part of the personality of the composer, that he projected on the figures of the women he loved.

Chopin and Paganini are composers whom Schumann greatly admired, but the pieces from

Carnaval, op. 9, with these titles correspond more to an 'exercise' in certain of their characteristics as creators, on the part of the composer of the work, than to the annulment of Schumann's musical personality. In other words, 'Chopin' and 'Paganini', in Carnaval, op. 9, correspond to an experiment in facets that are unusual in Schumann's manner of composing, in a kind of homage to these figures, and not to an 'incarnation' of their artistic personalities (Reiman, 2004).

Lastly, some of the pieces of this work have titles that do not evoke people, but rather dances, like 'Valse noble' and 'Valse allemande', in which we may deduce that Schumann is representing himself, from outside, in the garb of Eusebius and/or Florestan, in interaction with other personages – in this case 'dancing'. In overall terms, the composer's ego is broken down into multiple figures, being identified directly with some of them, and they are placed in dialogue with one another. For Beaufils, the masks are like a second face that is separated from the original, and Carnaval, op. 9, in its pictures of dissociation, expresses Schumann's tendency to dissolution within, unable to master the forms that come from his unconscious (Schnebel, 1981).

If we compare a work like Carnaval, op. 9, with Kreisleriana, for example, we easily reach the conclusion that the great difference between the two lies in the fact that the first uses names of personages in the titles while the second uses expressions that refer to emotional states. But, at the end of the day, are the personages of Carnaval, op. 9, not simply metaphors for Schumann's different moods?

## 5 | CONCLUSION

In the last analysis, on reflection about this question, I came to the conclusion that, in a sense, form in Schumann, and more specifically in Carnaval, op. 9, is reinvented as a poetic symbol of the composer's states of spirit, ceasing to be a mere exercise in logical reasoning. The ego does not conceive the form as an impersonal object, outside itself, but identifies with it, appropriates it. It does so in the same way as Schumann's mind appropriated Clara, Ernestine, Chopin, Paganini or the concept of *commedia dell'arte*. The composer does not leave himself in order to create. Rather, he 'sucks up' the world

around him to fill his creative mind, 'twisting' it to its own proportion. In short, Schumann manages to flood with subjectivity the coldest of tools: form.

Of course this is a typically romantic aim, but, even if at the service of the subjectivity of individual expression, form, for example in Liszt, never ceases to be a kind of tool. This kind of rational distancing is something that Schumann seems not to possess. The innovative use of form corresponds to his poetic intention of being the 'Jean Paul of music'. But, at the same time, it cannot be denied that all creativity is based on limitation and we cannot, in this context, ignore Schumann's own writings on his incapacity to develop and deepen ideas (Daverio, 1997).

The point I would try to make is that to develop and deepen an idea, it may be necessary to conceive it as an object outside itself. Without this, it runs the risk of being transformed into a representation of the feelings of the subject in relation to it.

This kind of 'feeling' in relation to ideas goes along with the reports in which the composer describes moments of crisis, during which the creative flow is blocked by a perturbing and destructive excess of emotion (Ostwald, 2010). Probably this marked personality trait is, thus, the genesis of the fragmentation of the 'self' and the resulting state of mental alienation from which Schumann suffered at the end of his life.

But, to a certain extent, such an individual approach to musical form – 'accidental' or not – ends up by revealing in a fascinating manner the emotional power of Schumann's creative universe, with the result that we do, in fact, fulfill the composer's intention of combining the art-music tradition of the age with the poetry of German romantic authors like Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (1763-1825), better known as Jean Paul.

Answering the question that justified my analysis, about the dissolution of form or the reinvention of form in Schumann Carnaval, op. 9, it can be said that form loses the conventional structural meaning and becomes like a metaphor or a narrative style symbol, as if the words of a language were used out of the conventional meaning in a new private language to use Wittgenstein distinction between public and private language (Wittgenstein, 1977), a language to

communicate an interior and inaccessible world notwithstanding understandable by others like a public language of emotions.

As Dagmar Axthelm says, Schumann's conception of music, "*Töne als den feinsten Stoff, welcher unseren Geist in sich schliesst*" ("Tones are the finest material that our spirit contains") (Axthelm, 2010, p. 118), and his psychological condition give us the justification to establish a bridge between the needs of the self and the procedures used in composition. Schumann uses the music to satisfy adaptation needs against fragmentation of the self. By doing that he gave a complete new meaning to abstract "musical forms".

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

Graduated from E.S.M.L. with Professor Tania Achot, Teresa da Palma Pereira has participated in masterclasses with Helena Sá e Costa, Sequeira Costa, Paul Badura-Skoda and Dimitri Baskhirov, amongst others. After concluding the Master's Degree at Catholic University of Portugal, has concluded a Post-Graduation in Royal Conservatory of Brussels, where she won a contest to act as soloist with Brussels Chamber Orchestra. Is now making the Doctorat at CITAR, under the orientation of Professor Sofia Lourenço, with a scholarship from F.C.T. Has

been laureate with international prizes such as 1st Award of "Maria Campina" International Contest and 2nd Award and jury's special mention in Concours International de Piano Son Altesse Royal la Princesse Lalla Meryem (Marroco). She has performed recitals all over Europe, Brazil and China and concerts with several orchestras. Recently, she has recorded her debut CD "Transfigured Waltz".

Sofia Lourenço, pianist, born in Porto, concluded graduate studies (Conservatory of Music of Porto, Faculty of Arts, Porto University). Pupil of Helena Sá e Costa since 10 years of age, was also guided by several pianists of reference (Sequeira Costa, V. Margulis, A. Larrocha, G. Sebok, C. Cebro, G. Sava, L. Simon). She obtained a Diploma in Piano Soloist (Abschlussprüfung Klavier) at the Universität der Künste Berlin, a scholarship by the Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisbon). She is a piano Professor at the ESMAE / IPP since 1991. Doctor of Music and Musicology at the University of Évora in 2005, senior researcher since 2007 (Director Musical Studies) with a Post Doctoral grant (FCT) at CITAR of the School of the Arts at Portuguese Catholic University. Dedicated to the dissemination of Portuguese contemporary music, recorded three solo CDs for the label Numérica (in 2008, "Romantic Porto: Mazurka and Romanza").

<http://www.artes.ucp.pt/citar/pt/projetos/mapp-multimodal-analysis-of-piano-performance>

Paulo Ferreira Lopes is an Assistant Professor at the Catholic University. Published 9 articles in specialized journals and 2 papers in proceedings of events. Participated in 4 events abroad and 2 in Portugal. Received 8 awards and / or honors. In his professional activities interacted with 5 employees in co-authorship of scientific papers. <http://www.degois.pt/visualizador/curriculum.jsp?key=5281707059658791>