

## Robert Schumann: Piano Quintet in E $\flat$ Major, Op. 44

Composed in 1842 during a creative spurt of chamber music, Schumann's only Piano Quintet was one of the pioneering works for this novel instrumentation: a piano with a full string quartet (two violins, viola, and cello). To this day, there are not many works for the odd combination — only a few dozen pieces make up the entire repertoire — but Schumann's Quintet placed the idea on the compositional map.

The Quintet met with immediate and universal critical acclaim, enjoying unanimous popularity throughout the composer's lifetime. Virtually its only contemporary critic was Franz Liszt, who called the work “*zu leipzigerisch*” — too Leipzig-like (where Schumann lived at the time when he wrote it), or provincial. But all other voices have nothing but praise for the piece. One early critic noted that it nicely blends both “poetic and purely musical” elements in a marriage between both Schumann's musical and literary bents (he toyed with the idea of becoming a poet for many years) and between the popular drawing-room chamber music aesthetic of the time and the concert-hall symphony. The work is neither suitable for a salon nor a huge auditorium, rather, it is best performed in a medium-sized venue, to accommodate both the soloistic piano and the more intimate string passages.

The first movement opens in a declamatory E $\flat$ , all voices in half notes for two bars, and then quickly begins to move into further divisions of the beat. Schumann then expands upon both the harmonic and rhythmic motives presented therein throughout the entire work. The movement is in classical sonata form, moving to the dominant B $\flat$  for the second theme, through a development, and then to a recapitulation, in which both of first themes return, this time both in E $\flat$ .

In the relative minor, the second movement “*In modo d'una Marcia*” is more of a nightmarish funeral march than an upbeat military march. Its somber theme is passed around the strings and piano, curt and pizzicato in a *sotto voce* dynamic. The B-theme of this movement is a wildly contrastive *arco espressivo*, the cello and first violin carrying long moving lines while the second violin and viola fill in eighth notes in hemiola against the piano's triplet quarters. Returning to the first theme briefly, the movement explodes with a fiery *agitato*, carrying us into an even more hellacious statement of the first theme. A second statement of the B-theme and one more repetition of the first theme bring the march to a quiet close in string harmonics, with the cello absent, making the viola the bass of the thin triad.

By far the most difficult movement of the work to grasp on just one hearing, the Scherzo seems to squeeze in just one more note than possible on every relentlessly ascending scale, the simple motive of this movement. A clever placement of accents and structural harmonies lend the chaos some skeletal coherence, but every time a beat is established, Schumann yanks the metric rug out from under our feet, reasserting the prominence of his maniacal scales. This section comes back twice, interspersed with two trios, and capped with a coda.

The challenge inherent in the composition of a last movement is both to create an entity that is of itself whole, and something that lends closure to the entire work. Schumann rises to both tasks in the fourth movement of the Quintet, giving it its own playful theme and bringing back material from the first movement to use as closing. The movement opens in C minor, then soon gracefully shifts to E $\flat$  major. A B-theme enters in G Major, and a development section ensues. The A and B-themes then return, followed by a fugato on the first theme material, and a seeming coda. At this point the movement feels finished, but the Quintet as a whole is not yet wrapped up, so Schumann ends his codetta on a strong dominant seventh chord, and follows it with a fugue, whose subject material is the first theme from the first movement in augmentation! The final coda involves a lyrical theme from earlier in the movement, which the viola and cello then propel into a final proclamation of E $\flat$  Major.