

Raising Arms Against the Philistines

Early in the Nineteenth century, there began a massive, concerted attack on the tradition of European Classical music, which had reached a high point in the work of Mozart and Beethoven. Recognizing, and fearing, the role of these masterworks of art in fostering a cultural environment that encouraged the spread of republican ideas—which, in the case of Mozart and Beethoven, was entirely conscious and deliberate—the European oligarchy undertook the patronage of music that was technically flashy, but impoverished of ideas; or, worse yet, that substituted novel and titillating sensual effects in place of ideas. This became known as the “New German” style, the “Music of the Future,” and, ultimately, as Romanticism; its leading practitioners were Liszt and Wagner.

The individual who emerged to defend the Classical idea against the “Music of the Future,” was the composer and journalist Robert Schumann—although, ironically, it is popular opinion today that Schumann was himself a Romantic.

The standard litany of the academics goes something like this: “During the historical period that preceded Beethoven, all composers were Classical. Beethoven started out as a Classical composer, but then, for some undetermined reason—perhaps glandular in origin!—he became Romantic. Henceforth, all composers became increasingly Romantic, until they reached a point where they underwent another metamorphosis, and became Modernist.”

The Unheard Idea

This academic dogma does not correspond to reality. The most distinctive quality that Robert Schumann’s masterworks, such as the piano suite “Carnaval,” have in common with Beethoven’s late works, such as the quartets Opus 131 and 135, is that the emotional tone seems to move rapidly and abruptly from one affective state to another, from what might be termed tragic, to comic, to heroic. What the composer is doing, is to create ironies,

paradoxes, which are resolved by an overarching, unheard *idea*, which maintains the absolute, perfect unity of the composition. It is this degree of rigor, which allows the artist to be “playful,” in the Schillerian sense.

To the listener whose cognitive powers have been damaged by the pathology of Romanticism, however, what is perceived, is a mere kaleidoscope of contrasting “effects.” A musician suffering from this outlook can easily destroy the composition in performance; one who understands it properly as Classical music, on the other hand, can drive home the paradoxes to powerful effect, while the greater idea acts to keep the performance on course, maintaining the cognitive tension that leads the listener’s mind toward the joyful resolution of the paradoxes.¹

Thus, Lyndon LaRouche, in his essay “Politics as Art” [SEE page 16, this issue], writes: “[I]n art, nothing must ever be arbitrary, never as the Romantics and so forth insist upon arbitrary, irrational whims, whims whose claims to art are limited to the presumption that that which is utterly irrational, such as the works of Richard Wagner, is unfathomably mysterious, and therefore incredibly artistic and sexy as well. There must be governing necessity, as there is in science. That governing principle of reason, must be supplied by the governing, underlying role of contrapuntal development, the contrapuntal development derived from the spark of well-tempered thorough-composition.”

The conclusive proof that Schumann understood this idea, is to be found in his compositions. But, in order to combat the growing tendency toward the arbitrary and irrational in music, Schumann became a political organizer as well, using as a vehicle the journal of music criticism he founded, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (*New Journal of Music*). Schumann peopled the pages of his journal with a cast of characters he called the “Davidsbündler” or “League of David,” after the Biblical King David, who played and composed



**Auf der Suche nach der poetischen Zeit:
Der Prager Davidsbund
(In Search of the Poetic Age:
The Prague Davidsbund)**
by Bonnie and Erling Lomnäs,
and Dietmar Strauss
Saarbrücken, PFAU-Verlag, 1999
Volume I: Commentary, Registry
of Works, Concert Documents
407 pages, paperback, 158DM

music, wrote poetry,— and slew the Philistines. All the half-fictitious members of the Davidsbündler, who contributed articles and aphorisms to the journal, had their real counterparts among the allies Schumann counted in his war against the latter-day Philistines: “Chiarina” represented the piano virtuosa Clara Wieck, whom he later married; “Felix Meritis” was Felix Mendelssohn; and “Florestan” and “Eusebius” reflected two contrasting aspects of Schumann’s own personality. These characters also appeared in Schumann’s compositions, particularly in “Carnaval,” which concludes with the rousing “March of the Davidsbündler against the Philistines.”

Davidsbund in Prague

The authors of the German-language *Auf der Suche nach der poetischen Zeit* present a detailed account of a group of Prague critics and composers who enlisted themselves as soldiers in Schumann’s army. Among them were August Wilhelm Ambros, Eduard Hanslick, Franz Balthasar Ulm, Josef

August Heller, Josef Bayer, Friedrich Bach, Hans Hampel, Joseph Alexander Freiherr von Helfert, and Bernhard Gutt. They constituted themselves the “Davidsbund of Prague,” and wrote in a style similar to that of Schumann.

The city of Prague had always played an important role in the musical history of Europe, as the capital of Bohemia, producing composers such as Zelenka, Reicha, and Dussek. Mozart had a network of collaborators there. At the point when Bohemia (what is today the Czech Republic) began to assert its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there appeared the two Czech composer/patriots, Bedrich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák. It was in the early 1840’s, shortly before the emergence of the movement for independence, that the Prague Davidsbund became active.

There were differences between this Davidsbund, and Schumann’s; whereas Schumann’s “Bündler” were all essentially his own creations, and expressed, in a variety of ways, his ideas, the Davidsbund of Prague was composed of a number of distinct, living individuals, who did not necessarily see eye to eye on all matters. They were not, for example, unanimous in opposition to composers such as Liszt, Wagner, or Berlioz, although the most prominent among them, Eduard Hanslick, ultimately became such a fierce opponent of Wagner, that Wagner lampooned him in *Die Meistersinger* as the pedantic character Beckmesser.²

The Prague Davidsbund shared with Schumann a reverence for Bach and Beethoven. Hanslick wrote the following in tribute to A.W. Ambros, who used the pen-name “Flamin, the last Davidsbündler”: “But that person, who now kneels reverently before Sebastian Bach and Beethoven and broods over ideas of great music and spatters ink upon music paper, that is Flamin, the last Davidsbündler.” And the authors of this volume report an anecdote about F.B. Ulm’s “all too early morning walk to a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth in a church, although he was a late riser, this with the observation, that the Ninth is also a church service.” It is this recognition that the tradition of Bach and Beethoven must be honored and



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Robert Schumann

defended, which absolutely distinguishes these writers from the Romantics.

The Prague Bündler who attained the most prominent historical role was Eduard Hanslick, and the authors report, with relish, some of his choicest polemics. (For example, he characterized Wagner’s music as “Wirkung ohne Ursache,” that is, “effects without a cause.”) Hanslick wrote an extremely influential manifesto against “program music” and other tenets of Romanticism, entitled “Vom Musikalisch-Schönen” (“On the Musical-Beautiful.”) It was Hanslick who personally introduced Brahms to Dvořák.

Competing Images of Man

One might have hoped for a greater appreciation from the authors of the historic significance of this movement in Prague. Despite the fact that the Prague Bündler had mixed opinions about the “Music of the Future,” the fact that there was any opposition to it at all is noteworthy. Certainly, the collective vision of the group was less clear than the personal vision of Schumann, and with the passage of time, the tradition of Bach and Beethoven was growing fainter; in Europe to the West, the Romantics were increasingly hegemonic. But, this movement in Prague set the stage for another development of great importance. After Schumann, in his last journalistic foray, had proclaimed Johannes Brahms his successor in composition, Brahms went on to sponsor

others, in particular, Antonín Dvořák. Dvořák, in turn, found other protégés in the African-American composer Harry Burleigh, and the African-English Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. So, in a Europe that was increasingly enveloped in the fog of Romanticism, Prague stood out as a beacon, however diminished.

In keeping with conventional obfuscation, however, the authors do not present the conflict between Classicism and Romanticism in its true light, as a life-and-death struggle between competing images of Man. Instead, their stated objective being to document a “forgotten chapter in the music history of the Nineteenth century,” they report, in “objective, non-judgmental” fashion, some of the influences, other than Schumann, which shaped the Prague milieu: the Romantics Novalis, the brothers Schlegel, and Ludwig Tieck—all of whom Helga Zepp LaRouche has recently identified as direct counter-operations to the republican Friedrich Schiller and the Weimar Classic, and as the precursors, along with Nietzsche, of the Romantic cult of Twentieth-century Nazism.³ Nonetheless, in producing their detailed account of this little-known history, the authors have done a useful service. Volume II of the book is composed entirely of source documents from the Prague Davidsbund.

—Daniel Platt

1. For a truthful performance of the “Carnaval,” look for a recording by pianist Arturo Benedetti Michaelangeli.
2. Even Schumann himself vacillated somewhat in his views toward the “new breed” of composers; he originally praised Berlioz, only to later attack him. A.W. Ambros wrote: “When Berlioz appeared in person 1845/46, that was it. ‘You were completely beside yourselves,’ said Schumann with a smile, thereby forgetting, that he himself, ten years earlier, had been ‘completely beside himself’ over the French composer.” In fact, the only person in Schumann’s circle who never wavered from a militant opposition to the “Music of the Future,” was his wife Clara.
3. Helga Zepp LaRouche, “Only a New Classical Period Can Save Humanity from a Dark Age,” in “Proceedings of the Schiller Institute Conference on the Subject of Strategic Method, Bad Schwalbach, Germany, May 26-28, 2000,” *Fidelio*, Summer-Fall 2000 (Vol. IX, No. 2-3).