

**Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**

**Symphony No. 1 in B-flat Major, Op. 38,  
“Spring”**

- I. *Andante un poco maestoso – Allegro molto vivace*
- II. *Larghetto*
- III. *Scherzo: Molto vivace*
- IV. *Allegro animato e grazioso*

Robert Schumann was one of the first truly great Romantics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Along with Berlioz, Weber, Chopin, Schubert and Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann forged a long and lasting influence on the composers of his time, as well as those that followed. And this was not only with his compositions, but also with his pen, as a respected music critic. Schumann was born in Zwickau on June 8, 1810. He began piano lessons at age ten and later studied at the University of Leipzig. Here he became a student of Frederick Wieck, his future father-in-law. He was a gifted pianist until a finger injury ended that part of his career. He was also developing as a composer. As David Ewen has stated “Schumann was the only one of the great composers to cultivate one area fully before proceeding to the next.” Following his compositional tract with the piano, he turned to the German Lied (Art Song). The inspiration for many of these was Clara Wieck, also a gifted pianist and the daughter of his former piano teacher. Friedrich Wieck did everything in his power to keep the love between the two from coming to fruition. He strongly opposed the idea of his daughter marrying a fellow musician. Schumann eventually took Wieck to court and was successful in gaining their right to marry. This they did on September 12, 1840. Close to 150 of the Lieder written during this time were written to express his love and feelings for his new bride. In 1841 Schumann turned to orchestral music and in 1842 to chamber music. In both genres, he was most successful. In addition, as stated before, Robert Schumann was one of the most gifted music critics of his day. His initial support of Chopin and his later championing of the young Brahms were instrumental to the success of both composers’ careers. Unfortunately, Schumann developed debilitating mental illness in his later years and was confined to an institution in Endenich, Germany where he died on July 29, 1856. The great conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, had this to say about Schumann and his music: “For me, he is the greatest purely Romantic composer and his music the exponent of the more affecting traits of German character, nobly representative of a people of Dichter und Denker (“Poets and Thinkers”), before their fatal unification and the ominous entry into the arena of world politics. The originality of his musical thought and design, his imagination and his warmth, his tenderness and his fire, his solemnity, and also his frolicsome boisterousness, the infinite variety of characters populating his musical stage, have secured Schumann a place in the heart of every sensitive musician and music lover.”

Robert Schumann’s First Symphony was sketched in a period of just four days, between January 23 and 26 in 1841. The full score was completed on February 20 and the first performance was given on March 31, 1841 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus with Mendelssohn conducting. The title, “Spring,” was given to the work by the composer, but should not lead the listener to expect a detailed program. Much as Beethoven had said about his Pastoral Symphony, the “Spring” is “More an expression of feeling than painting.” Schumann wrote the following to Mendelssohn prior to the premier performance: “I should be pleased if you could imbue your orchestra with something of the mood of springtime. This I had particularly in mind when I

wrote the Symphony. I should like to have the very opening trumpet call sound as if it came from on high like a summons to awakening. By what follows the introduction, I might then suggest how on all sides the green leaves are sprouting, perhaps a butterfly appears, and by the *Allegro*, how everything that belongs to Spring bursts forth.” Heady romanticism, to say the least. Nature was a source of great inspiration to many artists of this era and Schumann later revealed that a poem by the German poet, Alfred Bottger, had sparked his initial inspiration. His happy new marriage can also be assumed to have cast the glow that encompasses the entire Symphony.

The First Symphony is cast in the traditional four movements. A fanfare in the trumpets and horns, followed by a restatement from the entire orchestra, begins the slow introduction. A gradual *accelerando* then propels this introduction to the opening *Allegro* and the presentation of the first theme, which is derived from the fanfare itself. A second, gentler, theme is heard in the woodwinds. Following the repeat of the exposition, a robust development section then ensues. This concludes with a massive restatement of the fanfare which leads into an imaginative recapitulation. A brisk *Animato* brings the movement to a close.

As Edward Downes has written “The intimate *Larghetto* is one of the loveliest movements in all Schumann.” Hans Gál writes that the movement “a large, beautifully relaxed and expressive piece of music, has the fervor and melodic beauty of Schumann’s finest songs. The string orchestra displays its most lavish sound, with divided violins in octaves singing a love song.” Towards the end Schumann brings in the three trombones to prepare the transition to the third movement which follows without pause.

The third movement Scherzo is unique in two ways. First, it has two Trios, or contrasting sections, when one is the norm. Second, one of those Trios is in 2/4 time, in a movement that is most commonly in 3/4 time. The Scherzo begins with a vigorous pulsating theme remotely based on that of the *Larghetto*. There follows Trio I. This is the one in 2/4 and is quite brisk indeed. The Scherzo then returns, to be followed by Trio II, this one in the traditional 3/4. The Scherzo returns again leading to a short Coda, which utilizes both meters and brings the movement to a gentle conclusion.

The fourth movement is set in sonata form, as was the first. It begins with a magnificent flourish from the full orchestra. Two vibrant themes then inhabit the exposition and the subsequent development. It is at the end of this development that Schumann brings the movement to a pause and inserts a flute cadenza. This leads to the recapitulation and coda with its *accelerando* which brings the Symphony to a joyous conclusion.

It is for the eminent composer, musicologist and biographer Hans Gál to write “Schumann’s First Symphony was an instant success, which is rare in any case, and quite especially so with a composer’s first work for orchestra. It is incontestable that this is the most fortunate of Schumann’s symphonies in the first impression it makes, and this applies as much to the youthful radiance of the music as to its brilliant sound, the most successful use of orchestral color that Schumann ever succeeded in obtaining.”

--Stephen Larmore