



2013 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES  
ARTS, HUMANITIES, & SOCIAL SCIENCES  
JANUARY 6<sup>TH</sup> TO JANUARY 8<sup>TH</sup>  
ALA MOANA HOTEL  
HONOLULU, HAWAII

# ROBERT SCHUMANN'S ILLNESS AND ITS EFFECT ON HIS MUSIC

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# **Robert Schumann's Illness and Its Effect on His Music**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to the Department of Music**

**College of Arts and Sciences**

**The Honors Program**

**of**

**University of West Florida**



**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for**

**Graduation as an Honors Scholar**

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**July 25, 2012**

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my greatest gratitude to my mentor Dr. Hedi Salanki who has helped, supported, and inspired me throughout my research. A special thank you to the Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR) Summer Academy as well as Dr. Pamela Vaughan, head of the OUR Summer Academy, for giving me the opportunity to pursue research.

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## **Abstract**

Robert Schumann is one of the most famous Romantic composers of the nineteenth century. He is known for the great lyricism and virtuosity contained in his musical compositions. However, behind the beauty, artistry, and passion of his music, Schumann was an extremely complex and troubled human being. As a young man, Schumann suffered from two major physical ailments: a hand injury and syphilis. These afflictions heavily impacted the course of his life. The hand injury ended his dream of becoming a concert pianist when he was in his early twenties. The syphilis caused increasing physical and mental pain throughout Schumann's life. In his later years, Schumann had a complete nervous breakdown likely caused by the late stages of syphilis. He attempted suicide and later admitted himself to the sanatorium in Endenich till his death. The research will examine how Schumann's physical illnesses affected his mental well being, how his medical ailments affected his style of musical composition, and the type of medical care used in the nineteenth century to treat Schumann's mental and physical conditions.

## Significant Events in Robert Schumann's Life

Born June 8th, 1810, Schumann did not come from a musical family. His family owned a publishing company. Schumann had a relatively happy childhood with the exception of his sister Emilie's death and his father's death when he was sixteen. It was during these deaths that Schumann began to keep a detailed diary of his life (Ostwald, 1985).

In 1828, Schumann enrolled at Leipzig University as a law student. He transferred to Heidelberg University and later back to Leipzig when he decided to become a musician. In 1830, Schumann decided to give up studying law and become a full-time musician and composer. His mother was not thrilled at the idea. She did not think he had enough talent to earn a stable living as a musician and composer. However, Schumann persisted and began his musical training with Frederick Wieck (Ostwald, 1985).

In 1830, Schumann began to have pain in his right hand. The pain continued for several years until Schumann decided to give up his piano studies in 1832. However, he immersed himself into musical composition as well as writing and editing for his *Neue Zeitschrift fur Musik (New Journal of Music)* (Ostwald, 1985).

Unfortunately, another medical ailment was soon upon young Schumann. In 1831, he acquired a syphilitic infection. As research will show, the syphilitic infection likely stayed with him throughout his entire life. The untreated infection caused the infamous admission to the Enderich asylum Schumann is known for (Worthen 2007).

In 1840, Robert Schumann and Clara Wieck. Clara's father and Schumann's piano instructor, Frederick Wieck, was against the marriage. This forced Robert and Clara to gain permission to marry from the German court. The relationship between the couple and Clara's father was strained for life. Clara and Schumann ended up having seven children total before Schumann entered the Enderich asylum (Worthen, 2007).

In 1854, Schumann's infamous attempt at suicide occurred. He jumped into the Rhine River only to be unwillingly pulled out by nearby fisherman. He tried to jump in again, but was restrained by the fishermen. Several days later he was admitted to the Enderich asylum where he ended up dying at in 1856 (Ostwald, 2007).

## **The Hand Injury**

The hand injury began to pester Schumann him at the young age of nineteen. It is believed that he invented his own mechanical device to strengthen his fingers. There are descriptions in the writings of his teacher Fredrick Wieck that describe this type of machine (Basch, 1970). Although the device might be part of the cause of the hand injury, it is likely not the main one. There are other theories to Schumann's injury. One theory is syphilis (Ostwald, 1985). The problem with this theory is that Schumann got syphilis in 1831. His hand injury began in 1830. Also, syphilis does not produce the sort of symptoms Schumann complained of. Physical and neurological symptoms of syphilis manifest much later in life (MedScape). Another theory was mercury poisoning (Worthen, 2007). The problem with this theory is that the mercury would have been used to treat Schumann's syphilis which, again, occurred after the hand injury (R. A. Henson, 1978).

Schumann visited doctors to help cure his hand (Ostwald, 1985). One of the remedies Schumann agreed to was to obtain a freshly slaughtered animal and insert his injured hand into its moist belly. The warmth of the entrails, blood, and feces was thought to have healing powers. He also bathed his hand in a warm brandy rinse. He also tried electrical treatment as well as homeopathic medicine. In homeopathic medicine, he may have taken a homeopathic powder as well as a herbal bandage. None of these remedies assisted in healing his damaged hand (Ostwald, 1985). In one of his diaries Schumann describes his thoughts on using the remedies mentioned:

“ It is very strengthening. I feel such power and great tension throughout my whole body, that I really would like to beat somebody up.” (Ostwald, 1985)



The most logical conclusion for Schumann's injured hand is that he suffered from inflammation of tendons in the hands from incorrect piano technique, over-practicing, and the use of the finger strengthening device. The inflammation of tendons in the hands is common in modern day musicians, especially pianists (Hochberg, 1983). Although the hand injury ended Schumann's aspirations to become a concert pianist, he wasn't extremely devastated about this outcome (Ostwald, 1985). There were several positive elements of the hand injury. Schumann didn't have to compete with Clara for musical fame. He could dedicate more time towards composing. It provided an excuse for him to avoid military service. Also, Schumann got very nervous and anxious before he had to play in public. The hand injury relieved him of this stress.

## Examples of the Finger Strengthening Devices

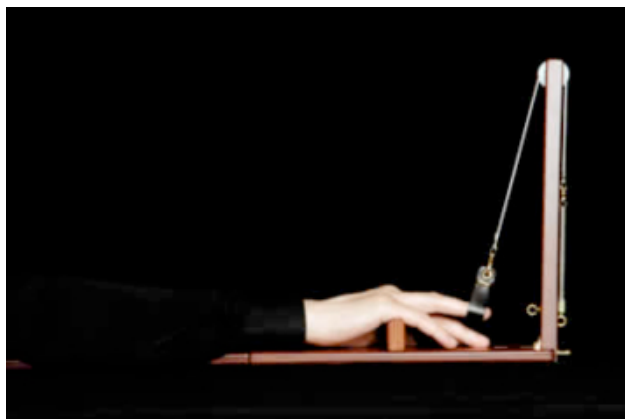


Figure 1: Example of Mechanical Finger Strengthening Device

<http://www.pianisttopianist.com/?p=10>

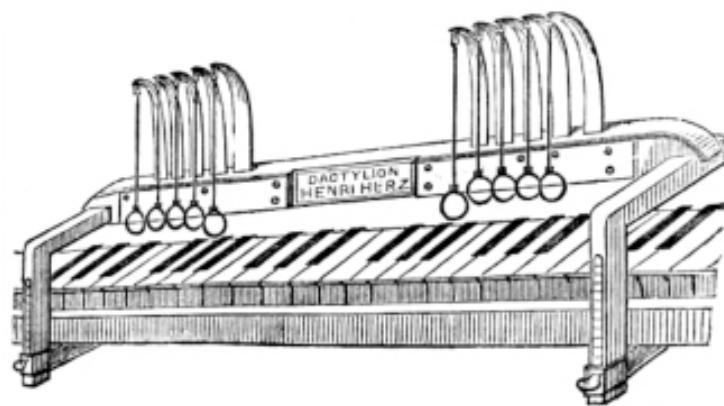


Figure 2: Illustration of Mechanical Finger Strengthening Device

<http://www.pianisttopianist.com/?p=10>

## **Schumann and Syphilis**

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. Transmission of the bacteria occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Pregnant women with the disease can pass it on to the babies they are carrying. A sore indicates an infection (MedScape).

The primary stage of syphilis is usually marked by the appearance of a single sore (called a chancre), but there may be multiple sores. The time between infection with syphilis and the start of the first symptom can range from ten to ninety days (average twenty-one days). The chancre is usually firm, round, small, and painless. It appears at the spot where syphilis entered the body. The chancre lasts three to six weeks, and may heal without treatment. However, if adequate treatment is not administered, the infection progresses to the secondary stage (MedScape).

Skin rash and mucous membrane lesions characterize the secondary stage. This stage typically starts with the development of a rash on one or more areas of the body. The rash usually does not cause itching. Rashes associated with secondary syphilis can appear as the chancre is healing or several weeks after the chancre has healed. The characteristic rash of secondary syphilis may appear as rough, red, or reddish brown spots both on the palms of the hands and the bottoms of the feet. However, at times the rashes associated with secondary syphilis are so faint that they are not noticed. In addition to rashes, symptoms of secondary syphilis may include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue. The signs and symptoms of secondary syphilis will may resolve without treatment. However, without treatment, the infection will might progress to the latent and possibly late stages of disease (MedScape).

The latent (hidden) stage of syphilis begins when primary and secondary symptoms disappear. When second stage symptoms completely disappear, the disease is no longer infectious. Without treatment, the infected person will continue to have syphilis even though there are no signs or symptoms; infection remains in the body. This latent stage can last for years. The late stages of syphilis can develop in about 15% of people who have not been treated for syphilis, and can appear ten-twenty years after

infection was first acquired (MedScape). In the late stages of syphilis, the disease may subsequently damage the internal organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. Signs and symptoms of the late stage of syphilis include difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, and dementia. This damage may be serious enough to cause death (MedScape).

How do we know Schumann had syphilis? The main piece of evidence is from his own diary (Worthen, 2007). In May 1831, he writes in his diary that he is in a relationship with a woman named Christel. Who Christel is has yet to be determined. Most likely she is a housemaid or student in the Wieck studio. We know he had sexual relations with Christel because of specific diary entries describing these relations (Worthen, 2007). At the beginning of their relationship, Schumann complained of many medical symptoms. He referred in his diary to a “wound” and “illness”. The wound ended up clearing up three to six weeks later. It was treated with a substance called Narcissus water, which was ground up daffodil bulb (Worthen, 2007).

Schumann’s diary entries over the summer of 1831 are not detailed enough to pinpoint a time when he might have entered the secondary stage of syphilis. Between 25 May and 11 July would however have been likely. Schumann felt ill between 21st and 30th June according to his diary (Worthen, 2007).

An infected individual, two to four years after the first two stages of the disease have passed, may start to have sexual relations and to engender children without passing on the infection either to the sexual partner or to the engendered children (MedScape). This explains why his wife and children did not inherit the syphilis.

Although there are cases in Schumann’s diary that describe “melancholia” and “anxiety” (Ostwald, 1985), there are also physical ailments described throughout the years of Schumann’s life such as dizziness, congestion, weakness, insomnia, eye trouble, ‘ragings in the limbs’, and ‘pains in various places in the head’ (Worthen, 2007). This has posed the problem of whether Schumann was a mentally ill patient, a patient whose tertiary syphilis advanced into neurosyphilis, or a combination of both.

After extensive research into mental illnesses and syphilis, the most plausible

explanation that would explain both his mental and physical anguish would be neurosyphilis.

### **Neurosyphilis: A Possible Diagnosis**

Neurosyphilis is the infection of the brain or spinal chord that occurs in people who have had untreated syphilis for many years (MedScape). Symptoms of neurosyphilis are listed in order of frequency: personality change (including cognitive and/or behavioral impairment), ataxia (loss of full control of body movements), stroke, ophthalmic symptoms (e.g. blurred vision, reduced color perception, impaired acuity, visual dimming, photophobia), lightning pains (larynx, abdomen, various organs), headache, dizziness, and seizures (MedScape). Schumann noted the majority of these symptoms in his diaries throughout the middle and later years of his life (Worthen, 2007). The symptoms began to appear with more intensity and frequency toward the end of his life. It is astonishing that so many biographers have ignored the physical ailments of Schumann. It seems researchers got it backwards. It was the physical ailments of Schumann that caused the mental demise in the end of his life not the mental ailments causing the physical ailments.

Various researchers still doubt Schumann's end came because of neurosyphilis. Why is that? Well, for many decades, Schumann's medical records from Endenich were believed to be lost. They appeared in 1991. A biography of Robert Schumann by John Worthen contains a translated report of his autopsy as well as the examinations by physicians during Schumann's stay in Endenich. These records show evidence highly linked to neurosyphilis (Worthen, 2007).

Another reason researchers might doubt neurosyphilis as Schumann's illness is because of his diaries. It is crucial to note that Schumann wrote in the Romantic era. Imagination was highly valued. Emphasis was put on intuition, instincts, and feelings. Schumann's diaries reflect the writings and thoughts of Romanticism (Rosen, 1969). There are elements in the diaries that Schumann might have exaggerated because of the Romanticism style valued at the time. Psychoanalysts took these into literal meaning and ignored the physical anguish he was going through.

A third reason why neurosyphilis has refused to be recognized as Schumann's illness is because of its the social aspect. Neurosyphilis was known to the psychiatrists of Europe in the nineteenth century (Shorter, 1997). It was one of the more common causes of death in the asylums in Germany and France during that time. However, the

disease was taboo. It would cause embarrassment to oneself and one's family in social circles. Schumann's wife and his close colleagues likely wanted to preserve his memory as a mentally ill genius rather than a sick man from an illness stemming from a sexual affair.

Far less attention would have been paid to Schumann's periods of melancholy during his lifetime if he had not died in an asylum. Such a belief in Schumann's mental illness has been allowed to overrule the overwhelming impression of him from other records of his life: his correspondence with family, friends, and colleagues and the evidence of his diaries. The correspondence and diaries show the youthful Schumann as an intelligent, emotional humorous, moody but mostly untroubled individual going his way through the world with wit, energy, and determination. The older he got, the more he came to organize his entire life around his work as a composer and family man, This affected his social relationships negatively, but it was never sparked the idea of mental illness to those who knew him. Dr. Carl Gustave Carus, a specialist in melancholia at the time whom Schumann consulted as a doctor in Dresden in 1845, observed no melancholia in Schumann (Worthen, 2007). Even Friedrich Wieck, while listing his objections to Schumann marrying Clara, had missed the biggest objection of all: mental instability. (Worthen, 2007). Not a single one of his contemporaries, before his illness of 1854, ever seems to have raised the possibility that Schumann was disturbed, or unstable, or mentally ill. (Worthen, 2007)

## The Eendenich Asylum

Before his suicidal attempt, Schumann began to suffer 'very strong and painful auditory disturbances'. He began to hear music 'that is so glorious and with instruments sounding more wonderful than ever one hears on earth'. All noises sounded as music to him. That description was consistent with ongoing damage to the areas of the nervous system responsible for complex music processing. This inner music began to turn into evil spirit voices. Surprisingly, Schumann himself wanted to be admitted to an asylum before the suicidal attempt. He notes in his diary that he began to become afraid of hurting Clara and the children (Worthen, 2007) (Ostwald, 1985).

Although admitted under the official diagnoses of 'melancholy with delusion', the 26,000 surviving words of commentary which Dr. Richarz and Dr. Peters left on their patient, written over more than two years, employ the words 'melancholy' exactly twice and 'depressed' once (Worthen, 2007).

Deprivation, physical humiliation, hallucination, rage, loss of speech, loss of control of bodily function---such things are detailed in the notes kept by his doctors, while the autopsy takes us into the structure of his skull and the tissues of his brain. Eventually Schumann desperately wanted to leave the asylum because of the dismal conditions. On January 22, 1855 Dr. Richarz heard him demanding to be taken to an asylum where he would be cared for properly (Worthen, 2007). Methods used on Schumann in Eendenich: straitjacket, fastening to bed, range of medicines laced into his food or drink, and inducing bowel movements. Schumann was always careful about what was prescribed to him. He believed the range of medicines given to him were poisons. Many of the drugs were laced into his food and drink. His soup was laced with Fowler's arsenic solution, his meat with iron powder, his wine with copper mixture, his coffee with ipecacuanha. He was battered by drugs: to calm him down, to stimulate him, to purge him, to make him produce stools of an acceptable firmness. Nothing he was given would have had the slightest effect on his condition except to upset his stomach and perhaps quieten him a little, while the enforced confinement would also have taken its toll on his mental state (Worthen, 2007).



The punishments for disobedience was a way of putting pressure on him to take his medicine, eat his food, drink his wine, and accept his enemas. The nurses that stayed with him in the room made sure he was being obedient. Disobedience meant being deprived of various privileges including access to his books and papers, being allowed to play the piano, being allowed to read the books he requested, and being allowed to have writing or music paper (Worthen, 2007).

### **Autopsy and Diagnosis at the Enderich Asylum**

His cause of death is most likely through self starvation. It during the time Clara came to visit. He was not eating or drinking much. However, when Clara offered him food, he gladly took it and ate enthusiastically. He died the next day July 29th, 1856 at 4:00 P.M. Sudden feeding of patients who have lost a great deal of weight as a result of chronic starvation is known to induce neuro-circulatory collapse, a physiological shock so severe that many cannot survive. After the autopsy, Dr. Richarz believes that Schumann may have had general paralysis. Although not known at the time, a couple decades later general paralysis was linked to syphilis and later neurosyphilis. The symptoms are very similar to the neurosyphilis except for the fact that general paralysis one of the more advanced states of the disease (Worthen, 2007).

### **Music at the Eendenich Asylum**

Schumann did compose music in Eendenich. He corrected music as well. He even played piano. However, for playing piano, he had to get special permission for it. One reason was that the doctors wanted privileges conferred in return for acts of conformity; another was because his piano playing had so badly deteriorated (Worthen, 2007).

In Eendenich, Schumann occasionally suffered hallucinations of music, but nothing apparently as troubling as had happened in February 1854, which still vividly remembered (Worthen, 2007).

Very few musical compositions of Schumann's from the asylum exist today. Clara most likely destroyed most of the works of Schumann in the asylum. She wanted to preserve his memory as a healthy, bright composer rather than a mental patient.

### **Schumann and Illness on His Music**

How was Robert Schumann's illness linked to his style of composition? I would like to start this discussion with a quote from the master himself. I think this will help us better understand what inspired Schumann to compose; essentially his thought process.

"I am affected by everything that goes on in the world, and think it all over in my own way, politics, literature, and people, and then I long to express my feelings and find an outlet for them in music. That is why my compositions are sometimes difficult to understand, because they are connected with distant interests; and sometimes striking, because everything extraordinary that happens impresses me, and impels me to express it in music..." (Robert Schumann 1838)

Schumann was more productive in his career when he was happy and healthy. He produced more compositions. It is important to note that Schumann was constantly composing...the compositions I refer to are totally finished and ready to be sent out for publishing. For example, in September 1840-41, after his marriage with Clara, Schumann was considerably healthy and happy. He composed over 27 works in one year! However, in 1844-45, when Schumann's health was beginning to slightly deteriorate, he completely finished only five compositions (Walker, 1972).

I found that by examining his life and listening to recordings of his compositions from that same time period I could see the correlation between his emotional state and his music. It is like Schumann is painting the listener a picture of his life at a given time in each of his compositions.

Carnaval is one of better compositions known for depicting characters and emotions. Eusebius depicts the composer's calm, deliberate side. Florestan depicts the composer's reckless and passionate persona.

These two compositions were written near the end of Schumann's life. You can hear a quiet acceptance of the closeness of death from the composer. In the days leading up to his suicide attempt, Schumann wrote five variations on this theme for the piano, his last published work. It is also known as the Ghost Variations because one night he suddenly left his bed, having dreamt or imagined that a ghost (the spirit of either Schubert or Mendelssohn) had dictated a "spirit theme" to him (Ostwald, 1985). What is interesting is that this theme actually showed up in two of his previous compositions!

This is one of the extremely few compositions left from when Schumann was in Eutaw. The words translate thus:

*When my final hour arrives*

*To depart from this earth,*

*I beg Thee Lord Jesus Christ*

*To help me in my last suffering.*

*Lord, my soul at the end*

*I commit into Thy hands.*

*Thou knowest well how to protect it.*

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