

André Boucourechliev, *Schumann* (1956)

Published in 1956 by Éditions du Seuil, in the “Solfèges” series, *Schumann* was André Boucourechliev’s first book. Here the thirty-one-year-old composer, then setting out on a successful parallel career as a critic and observer of musical life, confronted for the first time the common but difficult genre of the composer biography.

Though unusual for the time in its subject (one would have expected a book on Debussy or Stravinsky from a composer of the generation of 1925), this *Schumann* is in many respects less personal than Boucourechliev’s later books. Only in the 1963 *Beethoven* do certain key themes of his writing emerge, stimulated by his exchanges with intellectuals like Roland Bathes and Boris de Schlœzer: listening as a form of action, of communication, of confrontation with the work; the composer as created by his own works, not just creating them; the ethical reading of works as oppressive or liberatory. In terms of form, too, this *Schumann* in no way presages the reversal effected in Boucourechliev’s next book, in which he turns to Beethoven’s biography only after having discussed the works at great length. Its structure is classical: its introduction and eight chapters follow a strictly chronological progression, each part corresponding to a phase in the composer’s life.

Under the veneer of respect for traditional biographical norms, however, there are flashes of insight that anticipate Boucourechliev’s later writing. A certain way of talking about music, first of all: eschewing psychological overinterpretation and supposedly objective analysis alike, Boucourechliev pulls off the feat of staying grounded in the work as read and heard, without in the least sacrificing his subjectivity and sensibility as a listener. Another characteristic of the work is its determination always to resituate the composer within the wider world of German Romanticism; Schumann being “a true product of this poetic movement, [...] to extract him from it would be to misunderstand him”, Boucourechliev announces in his introduction (p. 5). Some sections also have a higher relevance, using Schumann’s music to address big aesthetic problems to which Boucourechliev would return at much greater length later in his career – questions of the relation of text to music (see the chapter titled “Mourir à force de chanter”, p. 96–116), of the unity of the musical work (chapter “Je n’œuvre pas en vain”, p. 136–58). We could hardly end without mentioning the fine chapter on Schumann’s criticism (“Davidsbündler contre Philistins”, 43–54) – music criticism raised to the level of art, in which “genius claims the right to be the sole judge of genius” (p. 44). It is tempting to see in these lines a vicarious portrait of the author himself as critic.

Though a first try, then, this book is nonetheless a masterstroke, one that will satisfy neophytes and confirmed Schumannites alike. The former will find an introduction as relevant as instructive; the latter will appreciate the new and

sometimes unexpected light that it throws on works they already know and love. All, finally, will appreciate the quality of Boucourechliev's style, his love of writing, which, like Schumann's love of music, comes through in every line.

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