"Hats off, gentlemen, a genius"

Robert Schumann’s review of Frédéric Chopin’s Variations on “Là ci darem la mano” by Mozart

This review, published in the Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung on December 7, 1831, was Schumann’s debut as a writer and marks the first appearance of Florestan, Eusebius, and Master Raro – imaginary characters that Schumann used to represent different aspects of his own nature. The narrator, “Julius”, is the pianist Julius Knorr, who played Chopin’s variations in Schumann’s home town Leipzig a few weeks before “An Opus II” appeared. When Schumann later published his collected writings, he modified several of his articles, including this one, cutting out a few sentences and changing some of the words. Our translation, however, follows the first version, which more truthfully represents the young Schumann’s spontaneous impression of Chopin’s music. The original article also contains slightly more detailed descriptions of Florestan and Eusebius.

The editor of the Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung, possibly because of reservations about Schumann’s fantastical style, coupled the review with another one of the same work, written by a “worthy representative of the older school”. He also mentions a third notice of Chopin’s variations, “in the same vein as Schumann’s”, which could not be published because of lack of space. This refers to a text by Schumann’s piano teacher Friedrich Wieck, which later appeared in several French and German publications.

Chopin’s letter (December 12, 1831) about a review of his variations refers to Wieck’s article. It illustrates the similarity of Wieck’s and Schumann’s ideas, as well as Chopin’s own amusement and incomprehension: “In the second variation he says that Don Giovanni runs around with Leporello; in the third he kisses Zerlina, while Masetto’s rage is pictured in the left hand [...] I could die of laughing at this German’s imagination.”

An Opus II.

By R. Schumann

Eusebius entered quietly through my door a while ago. You know the ironic smile on his pale face; the one he wears when he wants to excite one’s curiosity. I was sitting with Florestan at the piano. As you know, Florestan is one of the rare musical people who have already foreseen everything new and extraordinary long ago; strange things are not strange to them for more than a moment; the unusual immediately becomes their property.

Eusebius, on the other hand, an exceedingly fanciful person, picks one flower at a time. He attaches himself with more difficulty, but at the same time more firmly; enjoys things more rarely, but more thoroughly and more enduringly; because of this he is a better student than Florestan, and his performances at the piano are more unique, tenderer and technically more perfect.

With the words “Hats off, gentlemen, a genius”, Eusebius brought out a piece of music, apparently published by Haslinger. We were not allowed to look at the title. I turned the pages absent-mindedly; there is something magical about this veiled enjoyment of soundless music. It seems to me, moreover, that every composer has his own particular way of arranging the notes on paper: Beethoven looks different to the eye than Mozart, just as the prose of Jean Paul differs from that of Goethe. But now I felt as if I were being watched by strange, wondering eyes, the eyes of flowers, of basilisks, peacock-eyes, young girls’ eyes. In a few places the light became clearer – I thought I could discern Mozart’s

“Là ci darem la mano” wrapped in a hundred chords. I saw Leporello blinking at me, and Don Giovanni flying past in a white cloak.

"Now play it", said Florestan laughing to Eusebius, “we shall listen with our eyes shut, and won’t disturb you”. Eusebius obliged; we listened, squeezed together in the recess of a window. He played as if possessed, conjuring up countless characters with the most acute vividness; as if the spirit of the moment lifted his fingers above their mechanical functions. Admittedly, Florestan’s praise, apart from a delighted smile, didn’t consist of more than a remark that the variations might
have been written by Beethoven or Franz Schubert, that is if either of them had been a piano virtuoso. But when he turned to the title page and read: La ci darem la mano, varié pour le pianoforte par Frédéric Chopin, Opus 2, we both exclaimed in wonder: “An Opus two!”, and when Eusebius added: “Wien, by Haslinger”, when our faces glowed with rare astonishment, and quite a few other, barely distinguishable exclamations were uttered, such as: “Well, that’s something decent at last – Chopin – never heard of him – who can he be? – anyway – a genius! – isn’t that Zerlina laughing, or even Leporello?”, a truly indescribable scene took place.

Heated with wine, Chopin and lively conversation, we went to Master Raro, who laughed a lot but showed only little curiosity for Opus two: “because I know you and your fashionable enthusiasm for people like Herz and Hünten – but why don’t you bring your Chopin round?” We promised to show it to him the following day.

Eusebius soon left, quietly bidding us good day. Florestan, who for some time has been without a home of his own, sped through the moonlit street to my house. At midnight I found him in my room, lying on the sofa with his eyes closed. “Chopin’s variations”, he began, as if talking in his sleep, “still keep running through my head. Surely, the whole thing is very dramatic and Chopinesque, even if I found Eusebius’ performance lacking in Paganinian declaration and Fieldish touch; the introduction, since it is so complete in itself – (do you remember Leporello’s skips in thirds?) – seems to me slightly unfitted to the whole; the Theme, complete in itself (do you remember the Spanish grandee flirting most amiably with the peasant girl?).”

“However, this becomes quite self-evident in the second variation, which is much more intimate, comical, quarrelling, just like when two lovers try to catch each other, laughing rather more than usual. But how everything changes in the third! I tell you, this one is full of moonshine and fairy-magic; yes, Masetto is standing at a distance, cursing audibly, but Don Giovanni doesn’t take any notice.”

“Now, the fourth then, what do you think of that one, Julius? – (Eusebius played it very cleanly) – isn’t it just like a bold and cheeky girl, springing forward to meet her man, although the Adagio (it seems very natural to me that Chopin repeats the first part) is in B flat minor; which is very appropriate, as its opening presents a kind of moral admonition to Don Giovanni – it’s naughty, of course, and beautiful, that Leporello is eavesdropping from behind the bushes, laughing and mocking, that oboes and clarinets overflow with enchanting allurement, and that the blossoming B flat major should signify the first kiss of love.”

“However, all that is nothing compared to the last movement – do you have any wine left, Julius? – that is the whole Mozart finale – full of popping champagne corks, clinking bottles – Leporello’s voice in between, then the chassée and sei zung ghosts, the fleeing Don Giovanni – and finally the bold ending, beautifully reassuring and truly conclusive.”

Florestan ended by saying that only in Switzerland had he ever experienced a similar sensation. When at the end of a beautiful day the evening sunlight clammers up to the highest peaks, coloring the glaciers with red and pink before it suddenly flutters away and disappears, all mountains and valleys are filled with a gentle fragrance, while the glacier stands calm, cold and firm like a giant.

Translation:
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