



Christopher Bernard  
What Music There Is  
Beneath the Waters . . .

*The great is admirable even in ruins.*  
—Robert Schumann, as Eusebius

*On Monday, February 27, 1854, the man who many believe to be the supreme Romantic composer, Robert Schumann, tried to commit suicide by throwing himself into the Rhine. He died in 1856 after spending two and a half years in an asylum for the insane in the town of Endenich. This year marks the bicentenary of his birth, in 1810. Schumann was also an influential music critic, often using the dialog form, creating imaginary characters, or personae, to explore his ideas about music, literature, and society. His two most famous personae were Florestan, the fiery extrovert, and the dreamy, more lyrical Eusebius.*

- Florestan . . .
- Yes, Eusebius?

- I'm worried about him. He's gone out, still wearing his green-flowered morning robe.
- Well, what of it?
- But it's freezing cold. It's February, for heaven's sake. And it's raining. A bitter rain.
- Maybe he needs some air. God knows he's been having a hard time of it lately. The insomnia. The rages. The hallucinations.
- Yes, yes, true enough, but what . . . ?
- Well?
- I was just dreaming that . . .
- Now *that* would be a new one.
- I'm always dreaming, I know, but . . .
- Precisely.
- Just as you never stop flying at everything . . .
- .
- Now you *are* dreaming.
- Attacking everything . . .
- No, just the condominium of idiots and criminals who run everything!
- The criminals and the idiots, then. As though you'd never heard of sauntering, or negotiating, or compromise . . .
- To say nothing of dreaming.
- You're like Puck: your spirit has circled the globe three times in the time it takes most of us to yawn and say good morning. You're rebellion with a good conscience, revolt with a grin.
- We forgive the diamond its sharp edges. I don't have your sunny belief in the goodness of humankind despite the people you actually meet. I want to bloody the noses of most the fools I run into. I wish I could be half as nice as you are.
- No, you don't. You're in love with your anger. You keep me from melting into sugar candy. I keep you from blowing up the tearooms on Goethestrasse. We make a good team.
- In the head of one poet-critic-fantast-daydreamer-pianist-revolutionary-composer.
- No wonder he's confused! Poor Robert!
- Poor Robert . . .
- If only he knew . . .
- Maybe he does—have you thought of that?
- No, though he pretends to when he sticks us into his music reviews. "Florestan, what do you think of this new young ivory tinkler in Paris, this Chopin. Eusebius, I say, hats off, a genius!" That's when we happen to agree,

and old Raro needn't save the day with a choice aphorism.

- Speaking of whom, where is good old gemütlich Master Raro? I haven't seen him since *he* started hallucinating.
- Who knows. But it was an inspired move, you must admit. Without that, we wouldn't know what to call each other. You've seen the look he sometimes gets in the mirror?
- I avoid mirrors.
- He suspects something. He stands there staring into his own eyes, wondering what's going on inside that hyperactive brain of his. The chants of angels! The gnashing of demons! He doesn't know we're in here, spinning like hamsters, sending his music, his mind, his whole life, first one way, in hyperventilating spasms, a seething caldron of Byronic drama, and then, without a break, sailing into some deep, calm romantic lagoon of dreams, longing and nostalgia for everyone's lost childhood. He just thinks he's playing with his own head—he doesn't know *we're* inside there playing with *him*. But then, maybe he's right after all. Maybe we are Robert Schumann just as he is Florestan and Eusebius and Raro, and Chiara and Meritis, and Jüngling Echomein, and all the Davidites.
- Wherever they've gone. Have you noticed how one by one they've all disappeared? Are we the only ones left?
- Maybe. And maybe we're just as deluded as *he* is.
- My thoughts too, sometimes.
- So we agree on something else! The world must be coming to an end.
- I've always thought we got along splendidly once we discovered we're both locked inside the same skull.
- Like a piano's white keys and black keys: opposite and yet we harmonize perfectly. On good days, when it isn't February and *he* isn't wandering about half naked in the rain.
- He always needed someone to compose him.
- Touché.
- I won't ask which keys you think I am.
- Oh, you're the pure one, Eusebius—only pure white for you.
- Danke schön.
- Bitte schön. But you've got to admit, it's the black keys that have more fun.

- Poor Robert.
- Poor Robert.
- Even Clara can't cheer him. She even seems to make him worse. Remember when all she needed to do was play three notes on a scale . . .
- And he'd finish it off with a rhapsody. He's spent all the wealth of youth. What he knew he threw away, what he had he gave away.
- Romantics were never meant to live past forty.
- And what is he now: forty-four?
- He walks around the woods talking to the trees. And no matter how kindly he speaks to them, they refuse to talk back . . .
- Very rude, though it might help if the old baby didn't expect them to.
- Who of us doesn't rave at times? Anyway, that's not what I meant . . .
- Now, if he wants to have a shouting match with the shopkeepers and capitalists and bankers and princelings and merchant despots, the scoundrels who govern this show called reality! What he should want is war: not the merry little phony war he had with that mad old pater of his adored Clara and the pedants and mediocrities who rule Art, but the real thing, the revolution: tear this miserable old world, this dingy, hopeless, useless globe, up from its moorings and fling it out into deepest, coldest space, let it drown or let it conquer, at least it will know what it's made of. Sweep out the money grubbers from the temples of art, blow the philistines into that kingdom come they say they so long for, and remake the world in the heart's image, in all its wrath and joy and love and grief, make the dream real . . .
- No, no, no, on the contrary, Florestan: make reality a dream—you don't ask for reality from a poet. Though one hopes reality might bend once in a while to meet a man's desire. There are whisperings of the eternal now in every moment. Find them, live in them, and forget the rest of the world. Watch the moon, the unattainable moon, and live inside its dream. He used to *hear* something in the silence, if he listened closely. A whispering and singing beyond the rustling of the leaves, fluttering of the birds, the creaking of the boughs: something that pulled the

threads of the moment together into a perfect breathing fabric. A silence that spoke within a silence that listened. A music behind the silence. Then one day something happened: he no longer heard anything in the silence—all he heard in the silence was silence...

- Silence has a way of being that way. And since when did reality ever bend to meet a man's desire?
- They say it happens sometimes in America.
- They say everything sometimes happens in America.
- Even the end of the philistines?
- Oh, they're all philistines in America.
- And what's your definition of a philistine?
- Someone who measures everything by success. I don't love men whose lives are not in harmony with their works. And that can't happen if one must, by every possible means, succeed.
- It's a young country, give them a chance. They haven't failed enough yet. After that, maybe they'll learn some wisdom. But you're being arrogant and unfair, as usual—it doesn't make you the most likeable of companions.
- I'm just saying what I see. When I put two and two together, I keep getting four. And what's the point of being likeable if it entails being a liar?
- Don't be so literal. It isn't the point. Nor is your precious "honesty"!
- *Precisely* what I would expect a dreamer to say.
- You have to believe, Florestan.
- No, Eusebius: *you* have to believe. I have to fight.
- [Pause]
- Where is Raro when we need him?
- Gone to Bedlam.
- [Pause]
- And *he's* gone back to the piano.
- Full circle.
- No more overtures, quartets, oratorios, that odd fling at an opera . . .
- No more songs even—I imagine you miss the songs.
- And you miss the symphonies!
- What I missed was the piano.
- The dances, the fantasies, the March of David's

Band Against the Philistines . . .

- It's not quite the same.
  - No.
  - And he knows it.
  - Some of the things that come out . . .
  - Strange, gray, broken . . .
  - Like the cries of an angel with singed wings.
  - As if he got too close to the sun, and now he's falling . . .
  - And us with him . . .
  - Poor Robert . . .
  - Poor *us* . . .
  - Down to the sea.
  - But the soul lying with its wings folded is only half of beauty; she must soar.
  - And falconers tear out the feathers of their hawks to keep them from flying too high.
  - Well, maybe. The fight's gone out of him
  - The dreams have failed him.
  - And yet only dreams will save him.
  - Only fight will save him.
- [Pause.]
- It's so cold out there. Can't you feel it?
  - No.
  - Now he's going down Carls Platz . . .  
Bergerstrasse . . . Hefenstrasse and  
Akademiestrasse and Rheinerstrasse . . . to  
the bridge over the river. The rickety  
pontoon bridge his little boy loves to play  
on. He's bargaining with the toll collector  
and giving him a silk handkerchief to let him  
cross. It must be carnival time, I can hear the  
revelers walking about the city, laughing in  
the drizzle.
  - The lightning doesn't announce its visit by a  
butler. Durchhalten, Dichter! Hold on, poet!
  - He makes me nervous, the way he keeps  
stopping and listening and staring across the  
river . . .
  - Never . . . !
  - He seems to be listening for something.  
Waiting.
  - . . . let . . . !
  - As though he wants to know . . .
  - . . . go!
  - . . . what music there is beneath the waters.