

Abstract:

'From Literary Fiction to Music: Schumann and the Unreliable Narrative'

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The theoretical model of the 'unreliable narrator' in fiction took flight in the early 1960s; since at least the mid-1980s it has come to be regarded as a key concept in narratology, and an indispensable one. Simply put, unreliable character-narrators are ones about whom we as readers, in collusion with the author, learn more than they know about themselves. In modernist, contemporary, and postmodern fiction, 'unreliability' runs rampant as an umbrella term for radical experimental departures from the realism of earlier fiction. Within our own field, studies of musical narrativity have proliferated; but to my knowledge, with the exception of one as yet unpublished essay, the possibility of the 'unreliable narrative' in music has not yet been explored.

Precursors of modernist experiments in fiction – incipient cases of narrative unreliability – can be discerned in the works of a number of Romantic authors, and two of these – the novelist Jean Paul Richter and the poet Heinrich Heine – just happen to be two of Robert Schumann's favorite writers. The association of Schumann's early work, *Papillons*, Op. 2, with Jean Paul's novel *Flegeljahre* ('Fledgling Years') has long been known; Schumann fully acknowledged the association, but his often contradictory comments continue to plague writers about this work. I explore features of *Flegeljahre* that anticipate narrative unreliability, and I propose that, among the ways in which *Papillons* strives to capture something of Jean Paul's quirky literary style, the technique of tonal 'duality' plays a fascinating role.

A more developed instance of the unreliable narrator will be Heine's troubled poet-singer, in Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. Where Heine's portrayal of this persona mocks the sentimentality of earlier Romantic love poems, Schumann goes further. He invites us to hear a *second* persona through the voice of the *piano* – a persona who knows more about the poet than he does, and who would seem from the very outset to reveal his unconscious premonition that tragedy in love lies ahead.

I conclude with the suggestion that the emergence in the early nineteenth century of narrative unreliability, with new approaches to the novel and to poetry, may have served as an influence, or incentive, that drove experimentation not only for Schumann but also for some of his contemporaries and successors, including Chopin and Brahms. I also propose that our own work in musical narrativity might profit from considering the literary concept of a 'feedback loop', in which the composer, the potential 'narrator', and the listener, including the analyst and especially the performer, remain in constant interaction.