

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61

Born: June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Germany

Died: July 29, 1856, in Endenich, near Bonn

Work composed: 1845–46

First Performance: November 5, 1846, in Leipzig; Felix Mendelssohn conducting the orchestra of the Leipzig Gewandhaus

Toward the end of September, 1845, **Robert Schumann** wrote to his friend Felix Mendelssohn: “For several days drums and trumpets in the key of C have been sounding in my mind. I have no idea what will come of it.” Schumann did not wait long to find out. On December 12 of the same year, the diary he kept with his wife tells that he began composing a symphony, one in C major, with drums and trumpets playing conspicuous roles.

Once embarked on a composition, Schumann often worked with great speed. In this case, it took only five days to draft the new symphony’s initial movement and less than two weeks for the remainder of the work. But having made this rapid start, the composer fretted over orchestrating his piano draft, this task ultimately costing him much of the ensuing year. He finally completed the **Symphony No. 2** in October 1846, less than a month before its scheduled premiere.

Shortly after its initial performance, several reviews extolled the symphony, and not just for its purely musical merits. More than one critic heard a lofty spiritual quality in the music, an aspiring toward almost religious expression. This is not entirely fanciful. Three of the symphony’s four movements use chorale-like melodies, and its signature theme seems nothing so much as a call from on high. There are, to be sure, no references to actual hymns, such as we find in Mendelssohn’s “Reformation” Symphony. But in its own abstract way, this symphony seems a kind of psalm, a song of praise and rejoicing.

Schumann begins the first movement with an introduction in moderate tempo. Its initial measures present two ideas set against each other in counterpoint: a flowing line for the strings and a solemn fanfare in the brass. The latter figure will prove a “motto” theme, one that recurs at important junctures throughout the symphony. (Listeners familiar with Haydn’s last symphony, the “London,” will note a resemblance between its opening fanfare and the one Schumann uses here.) Soon the music grows more active, its rhythms more animated, and the motto figure sounds again before the tempo accelerates into the *Allegro* that forms the main body of the movement. There Schumann fashions his themes using the buoyant rhythms established in the latter part of the introduction, and he revisits the motto idea again during the accelerated coda that brings this first portion of the symphony to a close.

The second movement seems an attempt to write a scherzo after Mendelssohn’s style, with light, running passagework in the violins. Yet the result is still distinctly Schumannesque, thanks chiefly to the restless harmonies the violin lines trace. Balancing this fleet music are two contrasting episodes, the second very like a hymn. The final statement of the scherzo music includes another recollection of the motto idea.

Schumann builds the ensuing *Adagio* on a wide-stepping melody that seems more operatic than symphonic in character. This theme engenders the most beautiful slow movement among his orchestral compositions, a romance intimating deep poetic reverie.

From the rocketing scale of its initial measure, the finale strikes a triumphal note, and Schumann maintains this for practically the full length of the movement. Eventually we hear recollections of the aria-like melody of the slow movement, as well as the motto theme.

What to Listen For

The symphony's signature theme sounds in the opening moments: a stately fanfare played by the brass. It recurs late in the first movement, and in the second and fourth movements also. After the second movement's scherzo comes one of Schumann's most exquisite slow movements. Its principal theme first appears as a wide-stepping oboe solo, and Schumann recalls it briefly during the finale.

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