

Robert Schumann's *Burla* in G Minor

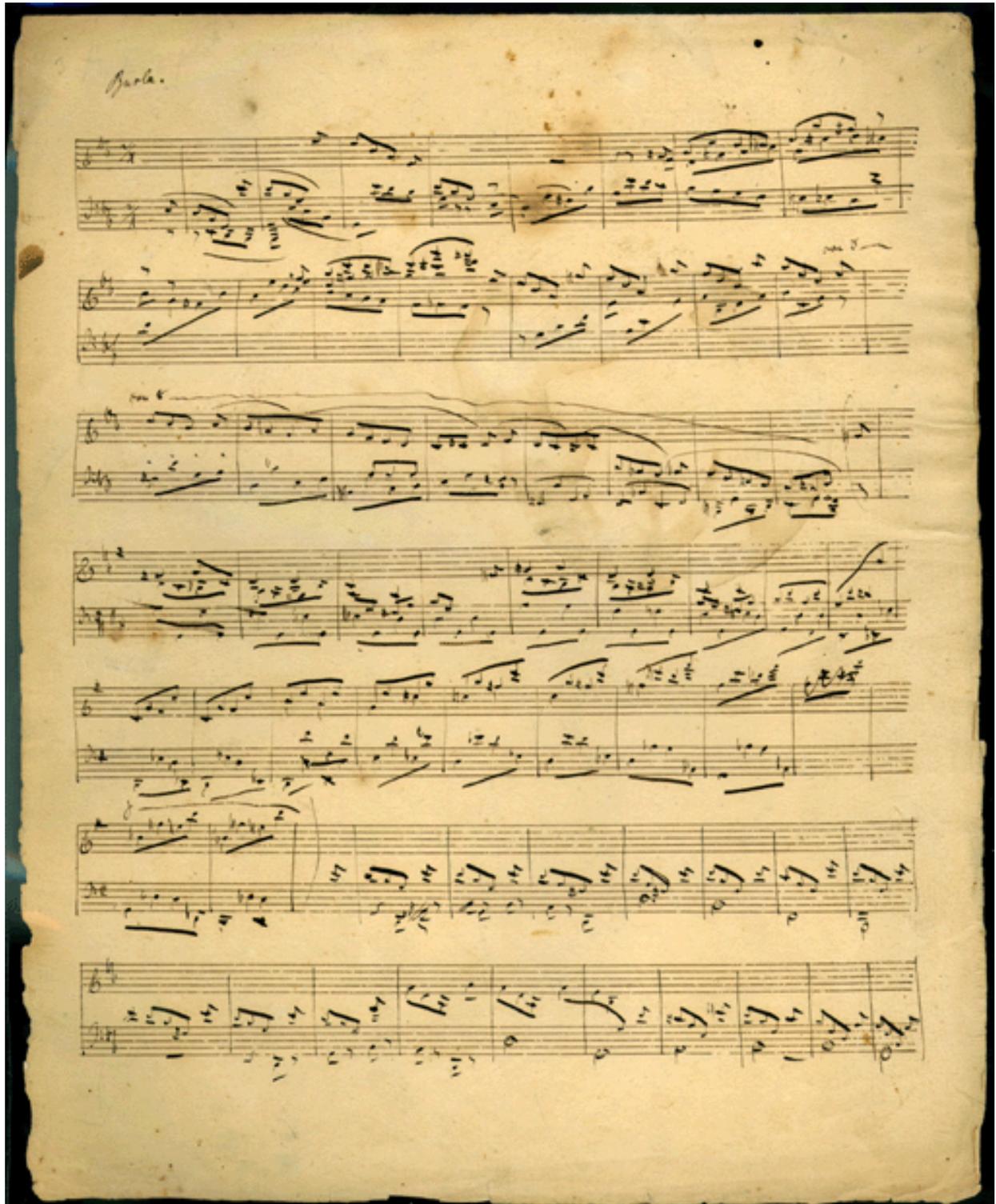
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Apart from occasional forays into chamber and orchestral music, Robert Schumann devoted his attention during the 1830s mainly to works for piano. In addition to publishing over a dozen collections of keyboard miniatures, three sonatas, and the C-Major *Fantasia*, op. 17, he left a number of manuscript fragments ranging from the briefest of idea sketches¹ to almost fully elaborated drafts. The *Burla* in G Minor, preserved on a sketch leaf now in the Moldenhauer Archives, is closer to the latter category.

This document is of special significance, not only because it makes a small but interesting addition to our understanding of Schumann's path toward artistic maturity, but also because it was originally part of a larger group of sketches whose whereabouts have been unknown for the past forty years. Described by Wolfgang Boetticher (who was working from a microfilm made sometime before 1954) in his comprehensive *Robert Schumanns Klavierwerke: Neue biographische und textkritische Untersuchungen, Teil II*, op. 7-13 (Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofen's Verlag, 1984), the manuscript was part of a private collection in Berlin until 1944, and for the next decade remained in private hands in Munich.² Although it consists largely of sketches and more complete drafts for portions of the *Symphonische Etüden*, op. 13 (first version)--and is to date the only known sketchbook devoted primarily to that work--the manuscript also includes materials for other projected keyboard works: sketches for *Henri Herz. Fragment satyrique*; a fifty-four-measure draft for No. 5 of the 6 *Konzert-Etüden nach Capricen von Paganini*, op. 10; a fifty-six-measure sketch for No. 11 of the *Impromptus über ein Thema von Clara Wieck*, op. 5 (earlier version); and, on its ninth and last page, a *Burla* in G Minor.³

The manuscript consists of a single leaf of upright format measuring 28 cm. by 31 cm., and hence is a bit larger than the sheets of this format that Schumann typically used for sketches during his early period.⁴ Following his customary practice, Schumann wrote on commercially manufactured paper, in this case with fourteen staves that the composer grouped into seven braces. The barlines, placed at roughly equal distances, were hand-drawn with a pen of finer point than that used for the body of the musical text, committed by Schumann to paper probably at a slightly later time. The crowding in brace 4, measures 7-8 supports the notion of such a two-stage process.

Like many of the other manuscript fragments from Schumann's early creative period, the G-Minor *Burla*--comprising sixty-one measures of music in 2/4 meter--occupies an intermediary position between sketch and draft.⁵ As it stands, the piece consists of an opening section (A) in G Minor (measures 1-24), a contrasting section (B) in the



parallel major mode (measures 24-43), and the beginnings of a varied return (A') of the initial music (measures 44-61), presumably in G Minor, though Schumann did not notate the change from the original key signature. Thus it falls into the kind of sectional or tripartite shape frequently encountered in Schumann's early keyboard music. But while section A and the opening phrases of section B are quite fully elaborated, it is difficult to imagine that Schumann would have left the ever-widening textural gap between melody and bass of measures 37-43 as it is without adding something for an inner voice or voices. In addition, Schumann had not yet determined how to negotiate the juncture between the B and A' sections; only a single measure (or, to be precise, three eighth notes for the beginning of measure 44) would be needed to fill out the last four-bar phrase of the B section. As for the A' section, its two-voice texture also seems to require further working out.

In short, what begins as a draft gradually approximates the appearance of a sketch. Schumann customarily went through his manuscripts several times for the purpose of adding expressive marks, articulations, performance directives, and the like. The relative density of these types of indications in the A section--rests, slurs, accents, staccati, an *all'ottava* marking, though curiously, no dynamics--lends further weight to the supposition that Schumann had completed the piece in its broad outlines and subsequently returned to the beginning to add details. The middle voice in measures 11-12 (which duplicates the inner line of measures 7-8 at the upper octave) may have been the result of such a process of amplification. In addition, Schumann took some care to ensure the accuracy of the accidentals in the opening portion of the piece; only one emendation is necessary, an E in the lowest voice, first eighth, of measure 12 (so that the passage echoes, an octave higher, the music of measure 8).⁶ The more skeletal B and A' sections, in contrast, have almost no articulative or expressive marks, contain many crossed-out notes, and omit many accidentals. For reasons unknown, Schumann seems to have lost interest in the little piece.

It is not possible to date the G-Minor *Burla* with absolute certainty. Nonetheless, it is likely that the fragment was conceived late in 1832. Although Boetticher assigns a fall 1834 date to most of the material from the sketchbook in which *Burla* originally appeared,⁷ some of its contents can be dated earlier. The idea sketch for *Henri Herz. Fragment satyrique*, for instance, can be assigned to spring or summer 1832 on the basis of an entry in Schumann's diary for May 14 of that year: "The idea for a satirical Fantasy after Herz is not bad at all."⁸ Furthermore, the title *Burla* (meaning "joke," "hoax," or "jest") figures often in Schumann's correspondence, diaries, and musical manuscripts during the early 1830s. In a letter of November 1832 to Breitkopf and Härtel, Schumann tentatively offered for publication a set of "XII Burlesken (Burle) after the manner of the *Papillons*"⁹ which had appeared as op. 2 under Kistner's imprint the year before. While the companion volume was never published--nor has it come to light in manuscript sources--

there is a good chance that individual *Burle* found their way into later collections such as the *Albumblätter*, op. 124 (published 1854, but consisting mainly of pieces written between 1832 and 1839), the twelfth number of which is a little F-Minor piece in duple meter actually entitled *Burla* and dated 1832. Schumann's nearly complete overview of the makeup of the "XII Burlesken" provides further evidence for this supposition: the entry for *Burla* 5 includes the additional designation "F min. 2/4."¹⁰ The G-Minor *Burla*, however, was probably not intended for this set. We can infer from the letter to Breitkopf and Härtel that the "XII Burlesken" were practically ready for publication, whereas the G-Minor *Burla* clearly was not. Moreover, none of the *Burle* in the overview are assigned a G-Minor key. But a list of works completed and works-in-progress from a diary entry of August 1832 includes not only "*Papillons, Liv.2*" [a probable reference to the "XII Burlesken"], but also "*2 Burle*."¹¹ The G-Minor *Burla* may well have been one of the latter two. *Burla* surfaces twice more as a title in the immediately following years: first, in connection with a sketch for an unpublished work built on the bass theme of the *Impromptus*, op. 5 (first version, 1833); and second, on a draft for the piece from *Carnaval*, op. 9 (1833-1835), that was ultimately titled *Arlequin*.¹² Thereafter it disappears from Schumann's repertory of imaginative designations.

Internal evidence likewise supports a late summer 1832 date for the G-Minor *Burla*. Beginning on July 12, 1831, Schumann undertook an intense course of study in thoroughbass and counterpoint under the tutelage of Heinrich Dorn.¹³ After his lessons with Dorn were suspended in April 1832, Schumann continued to hone his contrapuntal skills using Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg's *Abhandlung von der Fuge* (1753-1754) and J. S. Bach's *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* as his guides. The G-Minor *Burla* shows the extent to which this academic approach to counterpoint was put to creative use. The A section of the piece unfolds as a series of contrapuntal variations based on the four-note motive in eighths (E flat-D-B flat-G) announced at the outset. In the first phrase (measures 1-4) the motif gives rise to a three-voice stretto pattern, while in the second phrase (measures 4-12) a varied form of the motif (extended to two bars) meets with chromatic countermelodies. The third phrase (measures 12-16) features a combination of the original motif with its inversion, the former being smoothed out into a conjunct figure in the fourth phrase (measures 16-24). Although the B section begins with an apparently new melody in the parallel major over a *Trommelbass* and a G pedal, the inner voice clearly derives from the conjunct figure (measures 16ff.) of the A section. And just as the B section is subtly linked with the previous music, so it also foreshadows the restoration of the original motif in the following section: in measures 33ff., the inner-voice line gradually evolves into the extended variant from measures 4-12. What survives of the A' section introduces one last contrapuntal variation, the original motif serving as an undulating foil to a new, cantus-firmuslike idea in the bass.¹⁴

Thus, within a very short space indeed Schumann manages to employ an impressive array of sophisticated compositional devices: stretto, inversion, motivic evolution and

combination, and cantus-firmus technique. Yet at no point does the composer's erudition call attention to itself. Indeed, we are reminded of Schumann's own words from a review of 1837: "the best fugue is always the one that the public almost takes for a Strauss waltz."¹⁵ Or in the case of our sketch leaf: the best kind of contrapuntal artifice is that which dissolves into a *burla*, a jest. Schumann may not have finished this diminutive piece, but it nonetheless speaks to an important juncture in the evolution of his style. In the G-Minor *Burla* we already sense the move away from the light-hearted, improvisational dance idiom of *Papillons* and toward the rich, subliminally contrapuntal textures of the great poetic cycles of 1838, the *Kreisleriana*, op. 16, and the *Novelletten*, op. 21.

¹ The term is Linda Correll Roesner's. See her "Studies in Schumann Manuscripts: With Particular Reference to Sources Transmitting Instrumental Works in the Large Forms" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 18-19.

² Boetticher, op. cit., Teil II, p. 259.

³ Ibid., p. 260.

⁴ For his piano music of the 1830s, Schumann tended to use paper of oblong format with somewhat greater frequency than paper of upright format. When he did use paper of the latter type, it generally measured 23 cm. by 30 cm. See Roesner, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 63-64.

⁵ The preliminary compositional material for op. 5, No. 11 (preserved in the same sketchbook of which the Moldenhauer leaf originally formed a part) likewise exemplifies this tendency. Its first thirty-two measures conform closely to the finished version of the movement, while the ensuing measures assume a more sketchlike profile. See Boetticher, op. cit., *Teil II*, p. 260.

⁶ Boetticher transcribes portions of the *Burla* (measures 1-15 and 45-52) in Boetticher, op. cit., pp. 260-61, but incorrectly renders the lowest voice in measure 12 as E flat-E.

⁷ Ibid., p. 260.

⁸ "Die Idee zur satyrischen Fantaisie von Herz ist so übel nicht..." See Robert Schumann, *Tagebücher*, Band I, 1827-1838, ed. Georg Eismann (Basel and Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1971), p. 389.

⁹ See Gustav Jansen, *Die Davidsbündler: Aus Robert Schumanns Sturm- und Drangperiode* (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1883), p. 153.

¹⁰ The overview--now part of the largest single group of the composer's early sketches, in the Wiede Collection--contains entries for *Burle 1* through *9* and *Burla 12*. See Boetticher, op. cit., *Teil I*, op. 1-6 (1976), p. 101. Two other *Burle* can be provisionally coordinated with pieces from the *Albumblätter*. "*Burla 6* F maj. 6/8" with op. 124, No. 3 (Scherzino) and "*Burla 8*. As [A-flat] maj. 12/8" with op. 124, No. 13 (Larghetto).

¹¹ Schumann, *Tagebücher*, vol. 1, p. 413. *Papillons* and *Burle*, butterflies and jests, freely commingled in Schumann's youthful world of fanciful images. One of the sketches for the *Papillons*, op. 2, is titled "Papillon sive Burla"; see Boetticher, op. cit., *Teil I*, p. 59.

¹² See Boetticher, op. cit., *Teil I*, p. 146, and *Teil II*, p. 96.

¹³ For a discussion of Schumann's contrapuntal sketches from this period, see Roesner, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

¹⁴ Boetticher views this idea as a prefiguration of the theme for the *Symphonische Etüden*, whose sketches and drafts occupy the greater part of the nine-page sketchbook that once included the G-Minor *Burla*; see Boetticher, op. cit., *Teil II*, p. 261. Boetticher's claim, however, is not entirely convincing. Though both themes outline descending triadic lines, opus 13 begins with scale steps 8-5-3-1 in (C-sharp) Minor, whereas the quasi-cantus-firmus in the *Burla* traces steps 3-1-5-1 in (B-flat) Major. More compelling than the tenuous melodic resemblance between the themes is the similar use to which they are put. Etudes I, II, and VII of op. 13 all feature the triadic head-motif as a kind of cantus firmus. Hence it is the employment of this contrapuntal technique in the *Symphonische Etüden*, more so than its theme, that resonates with Schumann's practice in the G-Minor *Burla*.

¹⁵ Review of Mendelssohn's Six Preludes and Fugues for Piano, op. 35, in Robert Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, 5th ed., ed. Martin Kreisig (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1914), vol. 1, p. 253.