

“THE FUTURE NEEDS A PAST”

“Echoes of Schumann”: Jörg Widmann on his first Forward Festival



Jörg Widmann, this year you became Artistic Director of the Lucerne Festival Academy, and you are also helming Lucerne Festival Forward, the fall festival focused on new music. You have kept the name but added a programmatic subtitle: “Echoes of Schumann.” “Forward” points to the future, while “Echoes” suggests resonances from the past. How do the two concepts fit together?

Jörg Widmann: They are not mutually exclusive. Quite the opposite: they depend on each other. When I speak with my colleague Helmut Lachenmann, for example, it’s normal for us to discuss new

developments in music, but we also talk a great deal about Schubert. Or take Arnold Schoenberg, who revolutionized music history as few others have — perhaps only Beethoven. Schoenberg always made a point of saying that, in essence, he was doing nothing different from Johannes Brahms. So the question is: where do we come from and where are we headed? Is the music of the past still relevant to us? How do we, as people living today, respond to what already exists? These are all important questions. As the philosopher Odo Marquard so aptly put it: “The future needs a past.”

You are not the only one in whose work Robert Schumann resonates. At the Forward Festival, audiences will also hear echoes of Schumann in music by György Kurtág, Heinz Holliger, Christian Jost, and Aribert Reimann. How do you explain Schumann's powerful hold on us today?

I think it has to do with the fractured, torn quality of his music: one moment ecstatic, the next plunged into despair. As Charles Baudelaire put it: The abyss hovers above him. It is this sense of the abyss that still makes Schumann so compelling — because it is modern and simply very, very much of our time. I also sensed this in my conversations with Kurtág, Holliger, and Jost, all of whom have spent their lives engaging with Schumann.

Just as you yourself have done. Schumann-liebe is the title of one of your pieces that will be performed at the festival. To put it more basically: when and how did your own love of Schumann actually begin?

I fell in love with Schumann's music when I was perhaps eleven or twelve years old. At the time, I had a wonderful Argentine clarinet teacher, Raul Alvarelos, who rehearsed Schumann's *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 73, with me — he at the piano, I on clarinet. Perhaps it was still a little early for me, but the music seized me after just a few bars. How could it be otherwise for a young person encountering music of such incredible rapture? Once you get a taste of that, you're hooked on Schumann for life. That love endures, and it only grows stronger.

What especially fascinates you about Schumann?

I like to describe his melodic writing as resembling a fever-chart — something I don't know in quite this way from any other composer. These peaks and valleys, this swelling and ebbing, blossoming and fading in the most confined space — sometimes even on a single note. You find it even in Schumann's piano writing: countless swells on individual notes, even though the instrument isn't actually capable of them — great pianists cer-

tainly are, however. I even wrote a piece of my own about this phenomenon, my *Fieberphantasie* for piano, string quartet, and clarinet, which we'll perform during my lecture with an ensemble from the Lucerne Festival Contemporary Orchestra. It is precisely about this feverish, glowing quality that you also find in Schumann's *Fantasiestücke*. Or take the tempo markings: Schumann writes a movement that is already fast, then calls for "even faster," then "as fast as possible" — and a page later, again, "faster." Schumann pushes beyond the limits, and that fascinates me deeply.

But there is another side to Schumann that we want to explore in the opening concert with Antoine Tamestit and András Schiff: the very strange language of his late *Märchenerzählungen* and *Märchenbilder*. You find it throughout his chamber music following the failed revolution of 1848–49. It would be easy to say that Schumann was an escapist who fled from the real thunder of cannon fire for the world of fairy tales. But that would be completely wrong! If you look, for example, at the middle section of the final *Märchenerzählung*, you will notice how the viola and the clarinet are chained together, as if they were a single voice. Together they intone a dangerously simple, almost harmless melody — but the piano is playing an entirely different piece alongside it, a threatening, pulsing beat. There is something schizophrenic and broken about it, something that pushes us as performers to our limits and challenges us in completely new ways.

How do you take this up in your own "Five pieces in fairy-tale style"?

Quite literally. Like Schumann, I am fascinated by fairy tales as such. Long before Hans Christian Andersen, fairy tales had stopped portraying a world still whole and innocent. Fairy tales are psychologically highly complex because they also reflect experiences of suffering, fear, and loss. Think of Schumann titles like *First Loss*, *Almost Too Serious*, or *Frightening*.

I expanded on this in my *Es war einmal...* (“Once upon a Time...”) by setting the second movement in an Eastern fairy-tale land. I titled it *Fata Morgana*, and this fata morgana is, from an Eastern perspective, Schumann’s Central European world. Schumann’s pieces and mine also share the fact that individual phrases could be set directly to words: “And if they have not died ...” [a traditional fairy-tale ending].

Was it Robert Schumann who also had a hand in bringing together this illustrious trio: Andrés Schiff, Antoine Tamestit, and Jörg Widmann?

Yes, though that also has to do with the limited repertoire for our combination of

instruments. The nucleus of the genre is, of course, Mozart’s *Kegelstatt* Trio, yet Schumann’s *Märchenerzählungen*, with their enigmatic hermeticism, are the work in this genre whose resonance reaches furthest into modernity. There are not many great works for this instrumentation, but with the *Märchenerzählungen* we are indeed richly blessed.

On the second evening, two works for voice and ensemble will be performed: Christian Jost’s *Dichterliebe* and your own *Schumannliebe*, which is likewise based on Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*. Jost and Widmann: What distinguishes your approaches to adapting and expanding the original?

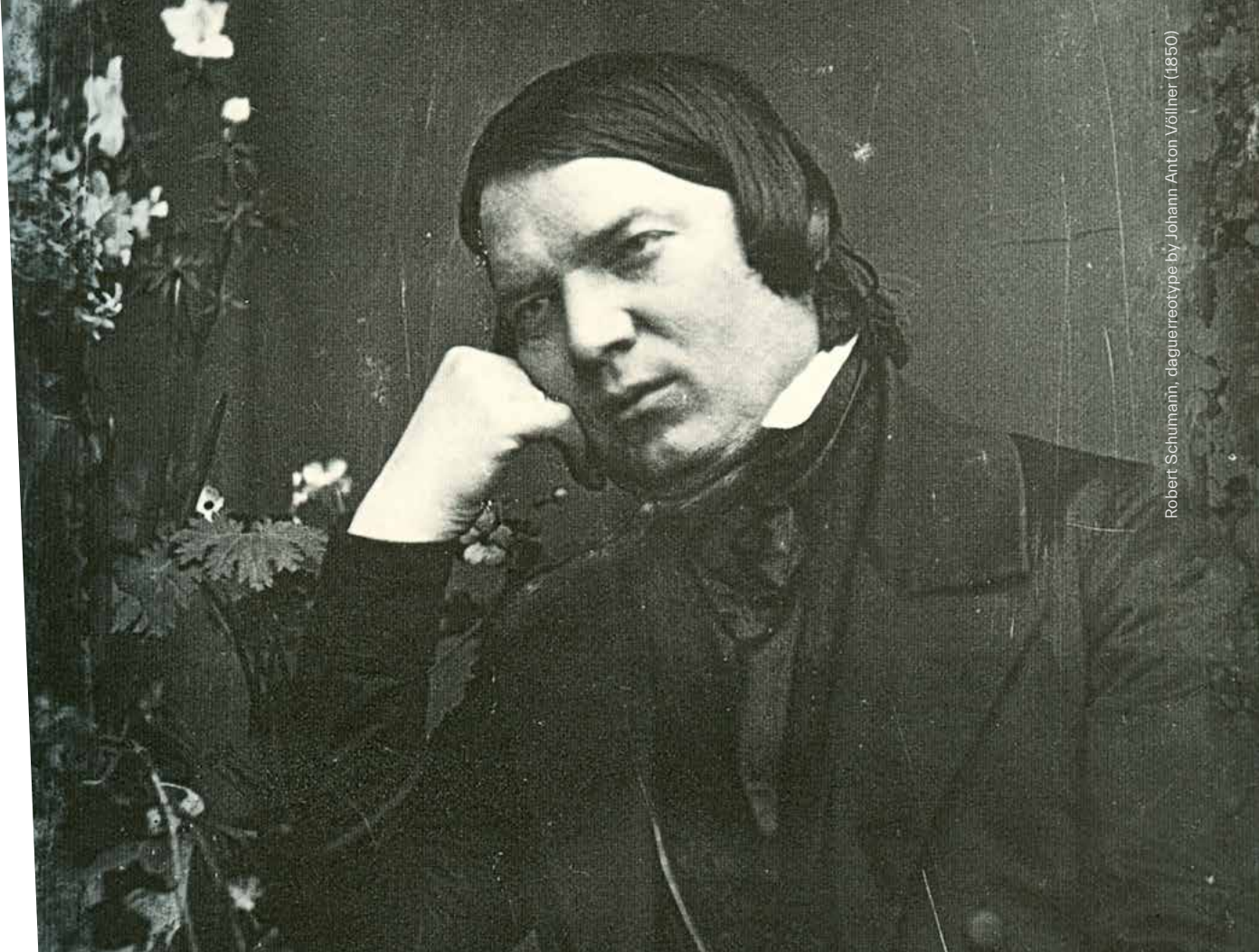
I found it especially appealing to program these two works together because they could hardly be more different. Of course, we both love Schumann very much, but Christian Jost takes a much freer approach to *Dichterliebe* than I do. His work is a soaring fantasy: he takes individual cells from Schumann’s song cycle and adds long preludes and postludes, freely spinning out Schumann’s music even as it remains present in the vocal line. I also find it beautiful that we are performing Jost’s version of *Dichterliebe* here with a female voice, which further enhances the in-memoriam character in relation to his wonderful late wife, Stella Doufexis. My *Schumannliebe*, by contrast, is intended for a baritone. Strictly speaking, it is first and foremost an orchestration of *Dichterliebe*. With very few, but important, exceptions, I have adhered strictly to Schumann’s vocal lines. The freedom lies in the ensemble part – for example, in the postlude to *Ich grolle nicht*, where I wanted the orchestra to growl all the more.

You also invited Johanna Summer to your first Forward Festival – a jazz pianist who improvises on Schumann.

Yes. Before her performance, she will listen to the concert featuring the two treatments of *Dichterliebe* by Jost and me, and perhaps afterward she will even take up something from Jost’s and my Schumann

The theme of the *Geistervariationen*, Schumann’s last completed work, in the composer’s own hand





Robert Schumann, daguerreotype by Johann Anton Völlner (1850)

reflections and mirror it. So: a third level of *Dichterliebe* as a late-night event.

How spontaneous can an improvisation like that be?

When I began composing as a child, I initially thought composing meant writing down what had been improvised. I still find that a beautiful definition. Of course, with our enormous contemporary scores, composing has become much more complex. But we want to recall the roots. Naturally, every improvisation has a basic framework in place beforehand. What then develops from it happens freely, in the moment.

On the final Sunday of the Forward Festival, you open with a Schumann lecture titled "Ver-Rückungen" – which might

be rendered in English as "Dislocations." What do you mean by that?

First of all, I am thinking of the many dislocations and rhythmic displacements in Schumann's music. Of course, the word "mad" [German *verrückt*] is also contained there, and with it, Schumann's end in the psychiatric hospital. The adjective "mad" is often used far too carelessly, whether in the case of Schumann or Hölderlin, about whom Pierre Bertaux wrote a defense arguing that he was all sorts of things, but not mad.

And how do you see it in Schumann's case?

Oh yes... Most people even seem to know exactly when Schumann became "mad" – perhaps starting with the *Gesänge der Frühe*, Op.133, or perhaps as early as the



Märchenerzählungen, Op. 132? I would say: if at all, then he was already “mad” in his Opus 1!

But back to the lecture.

I will sit at the piano and use musical examples to present Schumann’s “Ver-Rückungen”: the sharpened dissonances, for instance — the ninths and sevenths that he uses as if they were the most natural thing in the world. Or the fact that, at the very beginning of *Dichterliebe*, he pairs a C-sharp and a D in completely different registers within the tightest possible space — they do not belong on top of each other. Later, these became almost cliché intervals in new music, incredibly mod-

ern, and that’s what I want to highlight. It was quite different with Johannes Brahms, by the way: for him, even a fourth could sometimes amount to heavy lifting — as in the melody for solo violin and horn in the First Symphony. Certainly, Brahms was friends with Schumann, but their music could hardly be more different.

Madness also plays a central role in the subsequent concert, which features the Lucerne Festival Contemporary Orchestra and Heinz Holliger.

Yes, also because we’ve included Aribert Reimann in the program. He had a very personal connection to Schumann and his final two years in the psychiatric hospital

in Bonn-Endenich. In the estate of an uncle who was a psychiatrist, he discovered Schumann's medical records and made them available to the Berlin Academy of Arts — and thus to the public. Since then, we have known how Schumann was treated at the time, and also how wrongly he was treated. The records show the swings he was subject to, the forces tugging at him. You can also hear this in Schumann's final pieces, which were composed in the psychiatric hospital. They sound almost chorale-like, and you get the impression that Schumann is manically trying to hold on to the bar lines.

In the final concert, you'll perform Reimann's Seven Fragments in memoriam Robert Schumann. How close or distant are the two composers in their musical language?

This is absolutely Reimann's music. Even more than Jost, he focuses on small Schumannian sonic cells. It is a piece of contemporary music. But Reimann has the gift of inventing figures entirely out of Schumann's spirit. I am also proud that, in the final concert, we are able to welcome the greatest living admirer of Schumann, someone who simply cannot be absent from our festival: Heinz Holliger. He is himself a fantastic musician and a composer who conducts, and even at an advanced age he is as present as ever. Heinz is a walking encyclopedia when it comes to Schumann. He arranged the *Gesänge der Frühe*, which shook and thrilled me so deeply as a teenager when I heard them on the radio.

How does Holliger negotiate closeness to and distance from Schumann?

We hear the sound of writing on tape, and then the Schumann theme enters — but already defamiliarized. Heinz handles Schumann masterfully, and yet the work is pure Holliger. It is shot through with hidden references and tone symbols — the kind Schumann himself was fond of using. And because Holliger's score calls for a choir, we decided to open the concert with Schumann's wonderful *Nachtlied*. The whole program forms a beautifully rounded arc from the opening to the finale. We set out in search of traces and do not treat the contemporary pieces as something separate. This is the approach shared by all of the composers we will hear.

The interview was conducted by Susanne Stähr.



FIND OUT MORE

Video: **Jörg Widmann** in conversation with **Sebastian Nordmann** (in German)
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