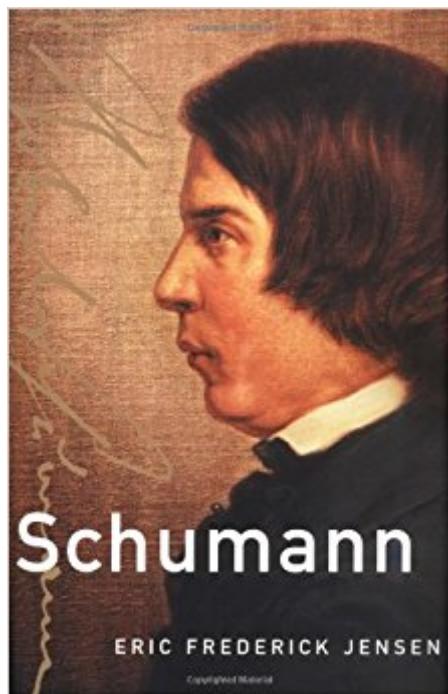


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Schumann (Master Musicians Series)



Synopsis

Robert Schumann, one of the most beloved composers of the Romantic movement, embodied the passion and imaginative spirit of his age. Known for his musical and literary genius and his legendary romance with his wife Clara, Schumann was also plagued with debilitating bouts of depression that led him to live his last days in a German mental asylum. This important new biography recreates the dynamics of this man and his music with unprecedented range, offering new insight into his final years and his lasting musical achievements. Drawing on Schumann's recently published journals, letters, and new research, author Eric Jensen renders a balanced portrait of the composer with both scholarly authority and engaging clarity. Biographical chapters alternate with commentary on Schumann's piano, choral, symphonic, and operatic works, demonstrating how the circumstances of his life helped shape the music he wrote at various periods. Chronicling the forbidden romance of Robert and Clara, Jensen offers a nuanced look at the evolution of their relationship. He also follows Schuman's creative musical criticism, which championed the burgeoning careers of Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms and challenged the musical tastes of nineteenth-century Europe. Most importantly, he presents new evidence that Schumann--locked away in the asylum at Endenich--had returned sufficiently to health to justify his removal from confinement a year before his death. Like the innovations of his final compositions from 1845-1854, his sanity was overlooked and misunderstood by his contemporaries. Jensen corrects the historical record, illuminating the tragedy of Schumann's final days and refuting the common dismissal of his final works as the result of an unstable mind. A significant addition to music literature, Schumann is the first authoritative biography of the composer written for general readers as well as music students and historians.

Book Information

Series: Master Musicians Series

Hardcover: 408 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (June 14, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195135660

ISBN-13: 978-0195135664

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.3 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #712,508 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #25 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Schumann #208 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Classical #1775 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Television Performers

Customer Reviews

"The reader is left not only educated musically, but saddened, mesmerized, horrified, and disgusted by the treatment Schumann received.... It's a tale of latent feminism, music history, and mental illness all wrapped into one. There's plenty of technical description for the musician reader, complete with musical examples that can be played or sung. There's plenty more for someone who can't read music but likes a rich life story of a complex human being who happened to be a musician."--Boston Globe

Eric Frederick Jensen was educated at Kent School and the Eastman School of Music, where he received a doctorate in musicology in 1982. He has written extensively about Robert Schumann for The Musical Times, 19th-Century Music, and The Musical Quarterly. He is the author of Walls of Circumstance, which examined the lives and music of eleven nineteenth-century composers.

Once you've read this book, you'll certainly understand the other appreciation/critique of Eric F. Jensen's "Schumann" that appears on this page. If you are fascinated by the amazing life that was Schumann's, you'll probably come away with a new perspective on his "adoring" wife Clara, the supposed priestess who presided over Schumann's musical legacy. And it won't be comforting. Jensen is too good and truthful a scholar to toss around accusations, but it's clear from the picture he paints of the last two years of Schumann's life, he had every right to feel abandoned by his wife and little aided by his well-meaning young friends Brahms and Joachim. Jensen starts with a sobering look at the diary entries written shortly after the Schumann's married. It's not difficult to see this early on in their marriage Clara's resentment over her stalled career as virtuoso pianist. Jensen also is clear and level-headed in his assessment of Schumann's art, praising where praise is belated due despite decades or even a century of misunderstanding by critics and audiences alike. Jensen thus includes a useful epilogue covering Schumann's successful exploration, late in his career, of the German fairy tale in music, especially its bizarre manifestation in the fantastic works of E. T. A. Hoffman and the adult fairy tales penned by the Brothers Grimm. But Jensen is equally truthful about the lack of inspiration and polish in much of Schumann's late musical productions--the

ballads for chorus and orchestra, the concert overtures, the religious music, as well as the concerted music for piano and violin. However, Jensen's point is that despite crushing mental problems, Schumann managed to create successful works almost until he was committed to the insane asylum at Endenich. It seems clear from what Jensen says that Schumann was not in a state of constant mental decline in his last years. He had moments of great lucidity even at Endenich, and if Jensen is right, the composer could have left the asylum and possibly recovered. Jensen's style may not be especially literary, but it is effective in a quiet, self-effacing way. Still, given the nature of his subject, I missed the soaring prose of John Devario's great recent biography of the composer. On the other hand, I wouldn't want to be without Jensen either. His scholarship is impeccable and his insights revelatory. Just don't come away hating Clara too much!

Jensen's biography of Schumann is a merely adequate portrayal of this most extraordinary composer. The prose is incredibly flat and repetitive--the "insight" that Schumann loved children--hardly original considering the "Kinderszenen" and "Album fur die Jugend"--is made several times, though any further elucidation is avoided. Another glaring failure of the book is the lack of musical analysis. After spending far too much time on the youthful "Papillons," Jensen practically ignores such ground-breaking works as the "Gesange der Fruhe" and the eerily gorgeous "Geistervariationen." Often, such works receive only a curious aside, such as "dense texture" and the like. Altogether an unsatisfying read.

I came to this book without any prior knowledge of Robert Schumann or any formal training in music, so I had no idea what to expect either from the subject or the author's assumptions about his reader. I was pleasantly surprised and enjoyed this book very much. The book is organized with music-specific chapters self-contained with details of Schumann's compositions. These chapters can be skipped if you wish to maintain the chronological narrative of Robert and Clara Schumann's fascinating career paths and life together. This is a story of artistic passion, tenacious pursuit of excellence, devoted love and friendship, and a fatal, tragic turn of events. The book does not end on a tragic note, however, but with Schumann's strong desire to bring the beauty of music to children, his sensitive and loving devotion for his own children, and his overarching passion to make the world a better place through his art. The writing is lively and the author is a skilled story teller. I look forward to future works from Dr. Jensen.

I have read this book twice through and then some, and have found it a revealing and moving

portrait of this gentle genius, among the most underrated of composers. The previous reviewer's dismissal of this book is very unfair. There is generally enough musical analysis here to whet the appetite. I would agree that many of Schumann's later works have been neglected (The author would also agree, by the way.) and that a few early works such as Papillons and Carnaval are overexposed. Inevitably in a book of this sort, one will have favorite pieces that he feels have been given short shrift. (I do too.) But to trash the book because attention is not lavished on a rather minor output such as Gesang der Fruhe is seriously out of whack.

SCHUMANN is a work of sound and thorough scholarship, refreshingly free of cant, pomposity, bombast, condescension, self-aggrandizement and arrogance, six pillars in the temple of bad academic writing. Mr. Jensen's thoughtful prose is eminently readable, his argument clear and convincing thanks in no small part to a masterly balancing of distance from and sympathy for his primary subject. The plight of temperament (in Schumann's case, genius) in conflict with ignorance, incomprehension, complacent professionalism and "benign" authoritarianism continues to be a matter of interest and concern. Who or what today would keep Schumann in a cage?

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