Musical Offerings

Volume 12
Number 1 *Spring 2021*

Article 1

4-22-2021

Fighting the Philistines: Robert Schumann and the *Davidsbündler*

Stephen J. White
Cedarville University, stephenwhite@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings

 Part of the Ethnomusicology Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Musicology Commons, Music Performance Commons, and the Music Theory Commons

DigitalCommons@Cedarville provides a publication platform for fully open access journals, which means that all articles are available on the Internet to all users immediately upon publication. However, the opinions and sentiments expressed by the authors of articles published in our journals do not necessarily indicate the endorsement or reflect the views of DigitalCommons@Cedarville, the Centennial Library, or Cedarville University and its employees. The authors are solely responsible for the content of their work. Please address questions to dc@cedarville.edu.

Recommended Citation

White, Stephen J. (2021) "Fighting the Philistines: Robert Schumann and the *Davidsbündler*," *Musical Offerings*: Vol. 12 : No. 1 , Article 1.
DOI: 10.15385/jmo.2021.12.1.1
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings/vol12/iss1/1

Fighting the Philistines: Robert Schumann and the *Davidsbündler*

Document Type

Article

Abstract

Robert Schumann was an eccentric composer and musical critic who influenced the Romantic-era musical community through the formation of the *Davidsbündler.* This "league of David" was Schumann's idea of a musical society which exemplified a distinctly pure style of modern musical composition. The style of the *Davidsbündler* was based on the idea that music must reflect the personal life experiences of its composer. Needing a journal to publish musical writings of *Davidsbündler*, Schumann created the *New Journal for Music*. Having himself suffered from mental instability throughout his life, Schumann's music often displayed unique levels of polarity and passion in order to show his own life experiences. Schumann's mental polarity and instability was directly showcased in his music through the natures of fictional characters Florestan and Eusebius. These characters are clearly displayed though the piano works *Carnival* and the *Davidsbündlertänze.* Through the use of modern musical compositional techniques such as chromaticism and syncopation along with clear characterizations of Florestan and Eusebius, the *Davidsbündlertänze* stands as a testament to the ideals of the *Davidsbündler.*

Keywords

Robert Schumann, Davidsbündler, Davidsbündlertänze, Florestan, Eusebius, Romanticism, Musical Philosophy, Neue Zeitschrift für Music, Carnival, Papillons, Mental Illness

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

This article is available in Musical Offerings: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings/vol12/iss1/1

Fighting the Philistines: Robert Schumann and the *Davidsbündler*

Stephen J. White
Cedarville University

Following a dramatic, unsuccessful attempt at drowning himself, Robert Schumann recognized his inability to control his own mind. As a result of this event, he checked himself into a mental institution where he remained until his death in 1856. While he had led a productive life as a composer and critic, his music and writings were ideologically linked to his own life and experiences. His philosophy dictated the need for a personal element in music, which he demonstrated through his work. He believed this personal element to be a key for any composer to develop new music. Robert Schumann created the *Davidsbündler*, or League of David, as a musical society with the goals of advancing new music and denouncing old-fashioned styles while symbolizing David's heroic fight against the Philistines.

The *Davidsbündler* and the Formation of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*

While Schumann is remembered for his musical compositions, one of his key sources of income was his written work as a musical critic. As an intersection between his musical and literary endeavors, Schumann developed the ideal of the *Davidsbündler*. In May of 1837, Schumann wrote to a colleague stating: "I have been thinking for some time of giving life to the *Davidsbündler*; that is, of uniting through the bond of the pen like-minded people, whether they are musicians by profession or not."[1] With the *Davidsbündler*, Schumann set about to form a society of musicians and music enthusiasts who championed the ideals of pure music. Schumann believed that this group of musicians was fighting

[1] Schumann, *Letters*, 108.

Musical Offerings 12, no. 1 (2021): 1–9
ISSN 2330-8206 (print); ISSN 2167-3799 (online)
© 2021, Stephen J. White, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND
(http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

against the Philistines, the current composers who wrote in opposing or outdated styles. While this league was not fighting a physical war, Schumann saw their battle as a musical endeavor of preserving and developing pure music.[2] While it is unlikely that this society ever existed on a material level with physical meetings and discussions, Schumann brought it to life through his own musical writings. Had the group physically existed, Schumann likely would have included composers like his future wife Clara Wieck and Felix Mendelssohn. Schumann considered these composers to be musically in line with his *Davidsbündler* ideals. Seeing the need for a journal in which to publish such works of musical criticism, Schumann founded the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (*New Journal for Music*) with its first publication being released in 1835.[3]

Late in life in 1854, Schumann reflected on the formation of this journal stating:

> One day these young hotheads [Schumann and a few fellow musicians] were seized with an idea: Let us not sit idly by; rather let us do something to improve matters, to restore the poetry of the art [music in Germany] to its rightful place of honour! Thus emerged the first pages of a New Periodical for Music (*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.)[4]

Consisting of musical writings from both Schumann and his close colleagues, the *New Journal for Music* aimed to reach and unify intellectual musicians across Europe who would join in the fight against the Philistines. Schumann fashioned this journal to mirror a similar intellectual musical journal, the *General Music Newspaper*. Despite similarities, Schumann's *New Journal* desired a musically professional audience while the other appealed to a broader, less musically literate group. Schumann's journal was also unique in the fact that it devoted the majority of its articles to works and topics that were relevant to the *Davidsbündler*, not the concert reviews and local news of other journals.[5] The *Davidsbündler* centered around three main musical goals for pure music which were often reflected in the criticisms in the *New Journal for Music*. The first of these goals was that music must display innovation

[2] Fowler, "Robert Schumann," 19.
[3] Fowler, "Robert Schumann," 19.
[4] Schumann, *Schumann on Music*, 13.
[5] Celenza, "Imagined Communities," 3.

with appropriate levels of both knowledge and respect of Classical forms and traditions. The second goal was that musical technique and virtuosity were to be subordinate to compositional ideas. Lastly, for pure music to be complete, it must reflect the personal life experiences and emotions of its composer. The *Davidsbündler*'s primary purpose within the *New Journal* was to promote and encourage music following the pure style and to denounce music which did not.[6]

Inside the Mind of Robert Schumann

To fully understand the *Davidsbündler* in relation to his music, one must also understand that Schumann suffered from mental illness. For some composers, personal life and music remained very separate fields. Schumann, however, believed that music should directly relate to the life and experiences of its composer, as was highlighted with the *Davidsbündler.* Because of this, his music was clearly influenced by his inner struggles. While he was able to function as a normal member in society, contributing to the musical community for many years, his work often reflected his mental instability. Schumann's mental state is frequently mirrored through his use of musical contrasts which display unstable or conflicting emotions. In her article, "Robert Schumann's Mental Illnesses (Genius and Madness)," Constance Pascal states:

> To understand and judge Schumann's work, one must have cognizance not only of his character, his education and the incidents of his life but also reveal the complexities of his delicate sensibility and study carefully the slightest pathological symptom, since his whole mind and soul left their mark on what he created and what he thought. Schumann immortalized his sufferings in his strange and sublime work. His cries of distress, sown throughout the world, created infinite sources of emotion.[7]

While people have argued about the root of Schumann's tumultuous mental state, it is clear that his compositional style both displayed and was directed by his internal struggles.

[6] Fowler, "Robert Schumann," 19.
[7] Pascal, "Robert Schumann's Mental Illnesses," 364.

Throughout history, there has been much disagreement in categorizing or diagnosing Schumann's illness. Nevertheless, scholars have generally agreed that his illness was a combination of mental and physical difficulties. Many consider Schumann to have suffered from bipolar or a similar manic disorder. This theory was based on his history of suicidal thoughts and manic episodes.[8] In addition, bipolar disorder could explain some of the extreme polarity that exists within his music. The most common diagnosis throughout history has been schizophrenia, which accounts for symptoms of emotional instability and frequent hallucinations present later in his life. The tumultuous relationship he shared with his wife Clara adds further evidence for this diagnosis.[9] Schumann also had a family history of mental illness. His father was diagnosed with melancholia, a classification for people with intense depression, hysteria, or delusions. His mother suffered from an undiagnosed mood disorder. The combined worry over his parents' mental illnesses and his sister's early death from dementia likely exacerbated his constant paranoia and fears over mental and physical illness.[10]

In addition to the great number of mental diagnoses, scholars also believe that his inner turmoil was caused by physical illness. Some consider that Schumann's mental illness was a result of a combination of poor health, a high-stress life, and overworking. There is also evidence to suggest that Schumann suffered from a form of syphilis which could help explain his rapid physical and emotional decline later in life.[11] Regardless of the exact causes of his emotional instability, it is clear that Schumann's works were greatly affected by the state of his mind.

Florestan and Eusebius

Schumann's mental illness can be seen through many figures in his writings and music, primarily Florestan and Eusebius. These names showed up in his writings and music when he was twenty-one and continued for many years. He first claimed that they had written in his diary to cheer him up and were his new best friends.[12] When taken literally, Florestan and Eusebius represent Schumann's own mental instability and duality. Florestan represents the wild, extroverted side of

[8] Currie, "Another Perspective," 131–132.
[9] Currie, "Another Perspective," 132.
[10] Pascal "Robert Schumann's Mental Illnesses," 361.
[11] Currie, "Another Perspective," 133.
[12] Ostwald, "Florestan," 21.

Schumann's inner self which is manic and unpredictable, and Eusebius represents his pensive and introverted side which is characteristically depressed. Before their marriage, Schumann wrote Clara that she would have to accept both "Florestan the Wild" and "Eusebius the Mild," indicating that they were a part of him and reflected his true personality.[13]

Florestan and Eusebius are musical representations of Jean Paul Richter's literary twins Walt and Vult Harnisch in the fictional novel *Flegeljahre*. Schumann was fascinated with these characters and depicted them in his piano work *Papillons*. He saw his work as an elaborate musical setting of the end of *Flegeljahre*. In the story, Walt and Vult are both trying to capture the love of the beautiful Wina. Walt's poetic nature and heroism are expressed through an elegantly ascending line in the opening of *Papillons*. Vult is cunning and sparklingly intellectual. Following *Papillons*, Florestan comes to represent Vult's intellect, and Eusebius to represent Walt's poetic nature. These new roles of Florestan and Eusebius were manifested in Schumann's music—first in *Carnival* and later in *Davidsbündlertänze*.[14]

The *Davidsbündler* in *Carnival*

Schumann's *Carnival*, a suite of miniatures, painted individual pictures of the *Davidsbündler* members in scenes reminiscent of a masquerade ball. The work begins with an introduction, then features character pieces for Florestan, Eusebius, Clara, and several other individuals. The dance scenes eventually culminate in the "March of the Davidsbündler against the Philistines." In this finale, the members of the League of David march against the Philistines who are represented by an old-fashioned dance tune which Schumann calls the 'grandfather's dance.' This so-called 'grandfather's dance' is also used in the finale for *Papillons* and is the *Grossvater Tanz*—a German dance tune from the seventeenth century which had a great deal of popular appeal but lacked substance in Schumann's eyes. By using this tune to represent the Philistines, Schumann makes a clear statement that the enemies of the League of David are those who cling to old-fashioned, out of date styles.[15] In both Florestan's character piece and in the finale, it is clear that he takes the place of heroic Walt from *Papillons* and suits up for battle as the leader of the *Davidsbündler* against the Philistines. This imagery is made

[13] Chernaik, "Schumann's Doppelgängers," 45.
[14] Chernaik, "Schumann's Doppelgängers," 45–46.
[15] Jensen, *Schumann*, 145–146.

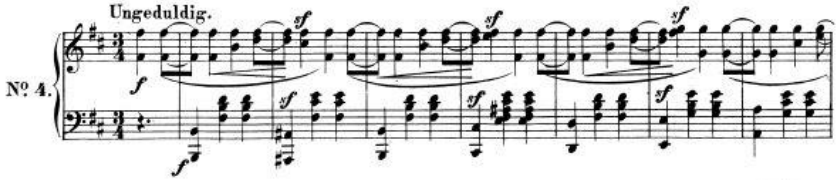
apparent through the borrowing of Walt's signature rising scale motif which Schumann uses in *Carnival* for Florestan.[16]

The *Davidsbündlertänze*: Schumann and the *Davidsbündler* in Action

The *Davidsbündlertänze* stands as one of the greatest expressions of Schumann's League of David by depicting the personalities of Florestan, Eusebius, and his future wife Clara Wieck. Meaning "dances of the league of David," the *Davidsbündlertänze* is a suite of piano miniatures which are based on German dance forms and thematically follow *Carnival* as a musical sequel. While *Carnival* consisted of character pieces and scenes of various individuals with traditional harmony, the *Davidsbündlertänze* is composed of two books, each containing nine miniatures which are more ambiguous and chromatic.[17]

The *Davidsbündlertänze* showcases Schumann's commitment to the *Davidsbündler* through the characterizations of Eusebius, Florestan, and Clara which highlight Schumann's personal life experiences. Within the collection, the first eight movements of each book are signed *E*. for Eusebius or *F*. for Florestan. However, in the case of No. 1, both *E*. and *F*. denote the presence of both alter-egos. Schumann often depicts Florestan through the notes F-natural and F-sharp, and Eusebius with E-natural and E-flat. Parallel to their own unique natures, Florestan and Eusebius are recognizably distinct in their signed movements. Florestan is bold, often loud, yet unstable in dynamics and rhythm as seen in no. 4 (Example 1).

Example 1: *Davidsbündlertänze*, op. 6, no. 4, "Ungeduldig," mm. 1–7.[18]



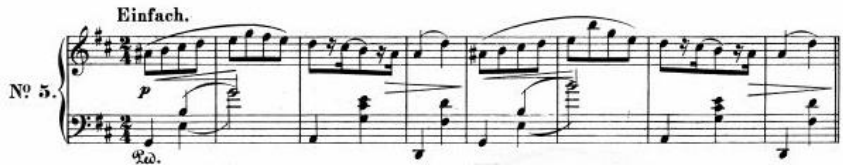
This movement's undulating nature directly relates to Florestan's personality and fits well with the tempo marking *Ungeduldig* which means "impatient." This instability is displayed through the offset

[16] Chernaik, "Schumann's Doppelgängers," 46.
[17] Chernaik, "Schumann's Doppelgängers," 50–51.
[18] Schumann, *Davidsbündlertänze*, IV, "Ungeduldig," mm. 1–7.

rhythms between the quarter note right hand, and the quarter note left hand rhythms which are staggered by an eighth of a beat throughout. This offset rhythmic pattern helps drive the piece forward impatiently, aided by offset *sforzandi* and driving *crescendi*.

Polar opposite to Florestan, Eusebius is often pensive, soft, and rhythmically balanced as seen in no. 5 (Example 2).

Example 2: *Davidsbündlertänze*, op. 6, no. 5, "Einfach," mm. 1–8.[19]



In this movement, Eusebius is portrayed through a balanced and dainty melody with smooth phrases and light accompaniment. The movement's tempo marking of *Einfach*, which means "easy," helps to reinforce Eusebius's thoughtful and quiet demeanor. While in a later edition Schumann removed the initials for Florestan and Eusebius from the *Davidsbündlertänze*'s titles,[20] the music still clearly highlights their contrasting personalities.

Clara Wieck and Franz Schubert also play important roles in the *Davidsbündlertänze.* Clara appears directly within the music in several ways. Schumann borrowed the first two measures of Clara's Mazurka in G Major, op. 6, no. 5 to begin the first movement of the *Davidsbündlertänze* as a direct quotation. In the last movement of each half there is no signature initial for Florestan or Eusebius. Instead, these movements depict Clara through her favorite key of C major. No. 9 also bears great testament to Clara as it mirrors her characterization in Chiarina from *Carnival*.[21] Fitting with his goals for the *Davidsbündler,* the *Davidsbündlertänze* also showcases Schumann's dedication for developing new musical ideas while respecting classical forms. Because Schumann greatly appreciated the work of Franz Schubert, the *Davidsbündlertänze* expands on Schubert's dance cycles—specifically his op. 9 and 9a waltzes. Schumann takes a similar multi-movement

[19] Schumann, *Davidsbündlertänze*, V, "Einfach," mm. 1–8.
[20] Kaminsky, "Principles," 216.
[21] Chernaik, "Schumann's Doppelgängers," 50.

cyclical approach, but instead of writing eight-bar dances for the purpose of dancing, he desired to paint a picture of the dancer. Schumann is distinctly modern in his composition through his use of chromaticism, distortion of key relations, and rhythmic complexity. The individual movements vary in length, complexity, key, range, and tempo in order to give the *Davidsbündlertänze* a unique and engaging nature.[22] Through a respect for classical form with new innovation and a focus on depicting his own life experiences in music, Schumann wrote the *Davidsbündlertänze* to reflect the goals of the *Davidsbündler* as displayed in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik.*

Conclusion

Through the creation of the *Davidsbündler*, Robert Schumann championed proper methods of a modern musical style and aimed to fight antiquated techniques. His musical style and philosophy were shaped by his mental instability, a struggle immortalized through the alter-egos Florestan and Eusebius. Both *Carnival* and the *Davidsbündlertänze* exemplify Schumann's modern musical style through their characterization of Florestan, Eusebius, and Clara in a way which supports the ideals of the *Davidsbündler*. His mental challenges affected him for the majority of his life and eventually led to his institutionalization and death. Despite his obstacles, Schumann left a lasting mark on the Romantic-era musical world. While the *Davidsbündler* has long since been buried in history books and largely forgotten, it directly influenced Schumann's musical methodology and aided in the creation of the *New Journal for Music*. The three core goals of the *Davidsbündler* were: innovation with respect for classical forms and conventions, musical technique and virtuosity being subject to compositional ideas, and an emphasis on the life experiences and emotions of the composer. Through these goals, the *Davidsbündler* helped shape a new generation of Romantics in Europe who valued the individuality and emotional depth in music that has been appreciated by musicians and musical audiences ever since.

[22] Chernaik, "Schumann's Doppelgängers," 51–52.

Bibliography

Celenza, Anna Harwell. "Imagined Communities Made Real: The Impact of Robert Schumann's *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* on the Formation of Music Communities in the Mid-Nineteenth Century." *Journal of Musicological Research* 24, no.1 (January–March 2005): 1–26. doi:10.1080/01411890590915467.

Chernaik, Judith. "Schumann's Doppelgängers: Florestan and Eusebius Revisited." *Musical Times* 152, no. 1917 (Winter 2011): 45–55. www.jstor.org/stable/41440730.

Currie, Norman. "Another Perspective on Robert Schumann's Personality." *Journal of Musicological Research* 30, no. 2 (April–June 2011): 131–163. doi:10.1080/01411896.2011.564052.

Fowler, Andrew. "Robert Schumann and the 'Real' Davidsbündler." *College Music Symposium* 30, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 19–27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40374040.

Jensen, Eric Frederick. *Schumann*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Kaminsky, Peter. "Principles of Formal Structure in Schumann's Early Piano Cycles." *Music Theory Spectrum* 11, no. 2 (Autumn 1989): 207–225. doi:10.1525/mts.1989.11.2.02a00040.

Ostwald, Peter F. "Florestan, Eusebius, Clara, and Schumann's Right Hand." *19th-Century Music* 4, no. 1 (Summer 1980): 17–31. doi:10.2307/3519811.

Pascal, Constance. "Robert Schumann's Mental Illnesses: Genius and Madness." Translated and edited by Felicia Gordon. *History of Psychiatry* 26, no. 3 (2015): 357–371. doi:10.1177/0957154x15589457.

Schumann, Robert. *Davidsbündlertänze*, Op. 6. Edited by Clara Schumann. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1887. https://imslp.org/wiki/Davidsb%C3%BCndlert%C3%A4nze%2C_Op.6_(Schumann%2C_Robert).

———. *The Letters of Robert Schumann*. Selected and edited by Karl Storck. Translated by Hannah Bryant. New York: Arno, 1979.

———. *On Music and Musicians*. Edited by Konrad Wolff. Translated by Paul Rosenfeld. New York: Pantheon, 1946.

———. *Schumann on Music: A Selection from the Writings*. Translated and edited by Henry Pleasants. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1988.