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E.T.A. Hoffmann and Music: a Background

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Hoffmann would appreciate the irony in his being a force central to some of today's best-known concert music and yet remaining a relatively obscure figure for the average concert-goer, for whom his name might come to mind only vaguely, in connection with Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, or perhaps from program notes on Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker" ballet. E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) did profoundly influence the course of western music. Among composers other than Offenbach and Tchaikovsky who adapted his stories to their musical purposes are Busoni, Hindemith, Malipiero and Wagner. Hoffmann was of perhaps greatest influence on Robert Schumann, and Hans Ehringer has demonstrated that all the music of Schumann's early period would have been quite different without Hoffmann's spiritual guidance.¹ Three of Schumann's piano suites, *Nachtstücke*, *Fantasiestücke*, and *Kreisleriana*, are based directly on Hoffmann "suites" of stories with the same title, and the *Carnaval* is also suffused with Hoffmann's tone.

But Hoffmann's influence on music went far beyond (inadvertently) providing literary material for musical adaptation. Hoffmann was himself a musician, though his reputation as an author now tends to obscure this fact, and he devoted a major part of his creative life to activities as com-

¹Hans Ehringer, *E.T.A. Hoffmann als Musiker und Musikschriftsteller* (Olten und Köln: Walter Verlag, 1954), pp. 240-241.

poser, conductor, theater director and music critic. A list of Hoffmann's major musical compositions includes eight operas and *Singspiele*, music for various other stage works, a symphony, motets, cantatas, songs, two masses and a *Miserere*, chamber pieces and four piano sonatas. Hoffmann's music was widely performed and was an important influence on younger composers of the period. Though Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* is usually considered to mark the beginning of German romantic opera, the work was obviously and by Weber himself admittedly dependent on Hoffmann's two fairy tale operas *Aurora* and *Undine*, which Weber heard and enthusiastically reviewed before beginning work on *Der Freischütz*.

Hoffmann's work as a music critic interests us here, for it is through this activity that he first turned to expressing himself in words rather than musical tones. Hoffmann has been called "the first classicist of music criticism" (Ehringer), setting standards for writing about music that are valid to this day. Schumann, Wagner, Berlioz and all subsequent music commentators owe him a debt for his work in this area. Hoffmann's essays on Beethoven (at that time by no means the universally-acclaimed giant he has since become) are now, after nearly two hundred years of musicological probing, still remarkable for their insight. Hoffmann's knowledge of music history was astonishing for a time when musicology as we know it did not yet exist, and his discussions of *unendliche Melodie* and the *Leitmotiv* found an enthusiastic ear in Wagner. Indeed, Paul Greif states flatly that neither Wagner's essay *Oper und Drama* nor *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* would have been possible without Hoffmann's far-reaching and prophetic treatises.²

²Paul Greif, *E.T.A. Hoffmann als Musiker und Musikschriststeller* (Köln: Staufem Verlag), 1948, p. 258.

Hoffmann was a highly gifted graphic artist as well as a lawyer and government official. (He lost one government position precisely because his caricatures of local officials were a bit too pointed.) He discharged his duties in the legal profession conscientiously and well, but was always torn between his desire for the life of a free artist and his need for the security of a government post. Hoffmann's clear-eyed, "legalistic" view of the multi-colored dream world of German Romanticism results in that curious fluctuation between ironic humor and romantic longing which is Hoffmann's central stylistic characteristic.

The first two decades of the nineteenth century--Hoffmann's period of greatest literary activity--were strange years in Germany. Music and literature were intermingled as perhaps never before or since, while Germany was torn by internal political rivalries and faced repeated invasion and occupation by the French. Indeed, Germany as a political unit didn't yet exist. The times encouraged the first great wave of "escape literature," which at that time also meant escape from government censors, and German creative artists turned to the romantic fantasy and in particular to the fairy tale for a kind of encoded self-expression.

The romantic fairy tale and music found their natural meeting-place in the fairy tale opera, led by Mozart's great example, *Die Zauberflöte*, which Hoffmann conducted several times. This impulse, picked up and developed by Hoffmann in his two fairy tale operas, *Aurora* and *Undine*, was carried further by Weber in *Der Freischütz*, and finds echoes as late as Richard Strauss and Carl Orff. Wagner's "Ring" cycle was first conceived as a fairy tale opera, but the figure of Siegfried took hold of Wagner's consciousness, with the result the world now knows.

The romantic conception of music and musicians became *the* conception of music, and the

notion of the musician alternately swept away by floods of uncontrolled, demonic passion and then transported to other realms on clouds of heavenly bliss has not yet wholly vanished from the popular imagination. Beethoven, by nature irascible and becoming more withdrawn with increasing deafness, had the role thrust upon him; Wagner, Liszt, and others accepted it eagerly, and so it went, down through music history.

Into this early nineteenth century world of enchanted princesses and tear-drenched illusions comes Hoffmann, a musician-writer with the clear-eyed vision of an experienced lawyer--a lawyer who must have had his sense of reality further sharpened by having been thrown out of one seemingly secure government position by bureaucratic skulduggery and out of two others by the French occupation. If Hoffmann knew the ecstatic escape route into another world through music, he also knew the hours of drudgery required to walk that road, knew first-hand of society people who served music to their guests along with the drinks. He knew of being forced to earn his living accompanying tone-deaf singers and of dealing with incompetent and spiteful concert masters and theater directors. When Hoffmann wrote of the plight of the musician compelled to "turn his passion into money to keep body and soul together" he saw the tragedy in the situation without losing sight of its farcical elements. The same penetrating glance that let Hoffmann see that the acclaimed virtuoso was "really" an ape dressed in human clothes, the feminine ideal of romantic longing actually a wind-up doll, let him see also the preposterous side of the holiest endeavor. Hoffmann has in common with Kafka and the French absurdists that he looks unblinkingly at the illusion and records it as meticulously as a legal brief. He sees the unreality of the "real" and the reality in the fantasy. By leaving peep-holes in the illusions he creates, by making the marionette strings controlling the "real" people visible, Hoffmann makes the

“real” suspect, and so creates a higher reality in unreality. Hoffmann believes he can “really” put on his Chinese dressing-gown and fly out the window on Mephistopheles’ coattails, just as he recognizes those bureaucrats and officials one deals with daily as “really” animals and automatons disguised as humans. This witty and brilliant mixture of real and sur-real, of the reverent and irreverent, is Hoffmann’s *leitmotiv*, which separates him utterly from other romanticists, and which forms a large part of his appeal for audiences of the present day³.

A few remarks about the musical essays specifically: They were written between 1810 and 1814, when Hoffmann was making one of his attempts to pull away from the legal profession and live from his artistic efforts alone, this time as theater director-composer-teacher in Bamberg. The pieces appeared individually, mostly in Rochlitz’s *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. Hoffmann later gathered the *Kreisleriana* essays with some other works, including *Ritter Gluck*, and had them printed as *Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier*. The figure of Johannes Kreisler, the half-mad musician who in a different frame of reference sees only *too* clearly, was inspired in part by Wackenroder’s Joseph Berglinger and by the figure of the mad musician sketched by Hogarth. The scurrilous etchings of Jacques Callot also found eager echo in Hoffmann. Studying the figure of Johannes Kreisler, it is easy to see why he held such appeal for Robert Schumann, who must have seen Kreisler’s quasi-schizo-

³It is tempting, though it strays from the point of this paper, to trace Hoffmann’s *Wirklichkeitsmärchen* (“reality fairy tale”) to the popular fantasy of today. In the traditional fairy tale, perhaps beginning “Once upon a time, in a faraway land . . .” the parameters are set to “somewhere else and some other time,” so that it’s no great surprise when a frog turns out to be an enchanted prince. Hoffmann takes great care to set a utterly realistic scene, with specific, verifiable time and place, into which he introduces his utterly *unreal* events. The two most prominent present-day purveyors of fantasy, Stephen King and Stephen Spielberg, follow the same scheme. The first part of every story sets an utterly mundane scene, to heighten the effect of the unreal events to come.

phrenic fantasies reflected in his own subconscious.

After a day's contact with musicians, would-be musicians, never-could-be musicians and musical Philistines on whom he depended for his bread and butter, after half a night's drinking with his actor-poet-musician friends, Hoffmann would go home to his tiny attic room on Bamberg's *Schillerplatz* (now a museum), would open the dormer window so his favorite neighborhood cat could wander in and out, and take up his pen as Johannes Kreisler, spinning his dreams into the night.

