

Research Article

Exploring Performance Techniques in Schumann's Piano Suite *Papillons*

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Abstract

Schumann's early piano suite *Papillons* is a cornerstone of Romantic piano literature and one of the most significant masterpieces of his youth. This work not only represents the evolution of the piano suite as a genre but also reflects Schumann's artistic maturity and innovative compositional style. Drawing inspiration from the composer's life, this study explores the historical and cultural context of *Papillons*, its musical characteristics, and its role in shaping Romantic performance practices. The article examines the suite's melody, rhythm, and harmony, highlighting the structural and thematic elements that contribute to its expressive depth. By focusing on the interplay between these musical components, the study identifies key challenges in interpreting *Papillons* and provides insights into the performance techniques required to overcome them. Special attention is given to the performer's "imagination," emphasizing its critical role in interpreting Schumann's intricate emotional landscapes. Through the construction of an inner vision, performers are encouraged to transform abstract musical ideas into vivid, evocative expressions. This research delves into technical elements such as force control, key touch, and pedal use, providing practical guidance for piano learners seeking to master *Papillons*. By dissecting the nuances of Schumann's phrasing and dynamic contrasts, the article offers actionable techniques to accurately convey the work's shifting moods and characters. Ultimately, this study seeks to foster a deeper understanding of *Papillons* in both technical and artistic terms. It aims to enhance the interpretative skills of pianists by bridging analytical insights with expressive execution. The findings serve as a valuable resource for performers and educators, offering a pathway to elevate the performance level and appreciation of one of Schumann's most iconic compositions.

Keywords

Virtuosity, Schumann, Piano Suite, *PAPILLONS*

1. Introduction

Robert Schumann was a musical giant of the first half of the 19th century in Germany. He was not only a talented composer and pianist, but also a keen and insightful music critic. Among his many works, *PAPILLONS* is a classic. This piano suite is an important starting point for the development of the title piano suite, and its artistic value and historical signifi-

cance are self-evident. The inspiration for the piano suite *PAPILLONS* came from the novel "The Age of the Young and the Restless", in which the plot of the masquerade ball gives the work rich emotions and vivid pictures. Schumann depicts a colourful ball, showing the desire and pursuit of love and the complex emotions that love brings. This emotional expression

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embodies the core characteristics of Romantic music and demonstrates Schumann's understanding of human nature, love and life. In the piano suite *PAPILLONS*, each piece has its own unique emotion and characterisation, ranging from joyful dance to deep lyricism, revealing the composer's exquisite skills and understanding of music.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss in depth the performance techniques of the first to the eighth pieces of *PAPILLONS*, and how the composer skilfully portrays various characters and expresses his inner emotions in the work. By analysing this work in detail, one can gain a deeper understanding of Schumann's musical style and creative concepts when performing it, and also further feel the emotional depth and artistic charm contained in this piano suite.

1.1. Schumann and His Piano Suite *PAPILLONS*

1.1.1. Composer Profiles

Schumann was one of the outstanding composers, pianists, and music critics of the 19th-century German Romantic School. His understanding of music was unique and thorough, having a deep literary background and features of style. The interest in music and philosophy brought up by his father influenced Schumann. Most of his compositions reflected his literary and philosophical inclinations, making him one of the pioneers in the elevation of the piano suite genre [1, 2].

Schumann is also called the "Poet of Music," as his music constructs a poetic castle of melody striking at the heart. For example, *Papillons* have double symbolic meanings: fluttering butterflies and the intricate relationships of characters interspersed at the ball [3].

1.1.2. Creative Conte

Papillons was Schumann's first piano suite, composed in 1831, during the heyday of European Romantic music [4]. It was inspired by Jean Paul's novel *Flegeljahre*, particularly the depiction of a masquerade ball, where various masked characters experience a range of emotions [5]. *PAPILLONS* is Schumann was inspired by the German novelist Jean-Paul "Lesser Years" at the end of the "larval dance" and created, the chapter depicts the grand masquerade, all kinds of characters wearing masks to dance, which triggered a series of love-hate entanglements of the story. The structure of the suite is like a poet's deep love in a few lines of verse, engraving his own experience like a diary in short, sharp and distinctive vignettes, and then stringing them together into a suite, thus conveying a complete and profound poetic realm. Schumann's piano suite *PAPILLONS* successfully combines the plot of the novel with music through in-depth characterisation and rich emotional expression, presenting listeners with a musical work full of romanticism. Schumann used this imagery to create a suite that reflects his understanding of

human nature, love, and life through musical storytelling [6].

1.1.3. Characterisation

PAPILLONS is a musical work full of romanticism, through the rich musical language and unique artistic techniques, successfully portrays a pair of twin brothers, Bart and Bulte, and the beautiful Vina, which are three very different and distinctive musical images.

(i). Barth

In this suite, the earliest piece of music that depicts the image of Barthes, one of the main characters, is in the second piece. Although this piece of music is short, the composer portrays his enthusiastic, lively and fanciful character through the stronger, lighter, and wider range of notes. For example, in Score 1, the arpeggios in the fast upward movement to the high register and the decomposed chord arpeggios in the alternating downward octaves of the left and right hands vividly depict Bart's comical entrance and cheerful and lively image, making this character come to life in the music. Barth's lively and fanciful nature is portrayed in the second piece through upward arpeggios and wide-ranging notes. This reflects Schumann's nuanced approach to characterization in music [7].



Figure 1. Arpeggio Analysis. Spectrum example 1.

When playing fast upward arpeggios, the area of the fingers should be larger, and the fingers should carry a certain amount of weight; while when playing downward broken chord arpeggios with alternating hands, you need to concentrate your fingertip power on one point, and press the keys quickly.

(ii). Boulton

In *PAPILLONS*, Boulton is also a character with distinctive features. Boulton is depicted as a shy delicate and sensitive person, contrasting with Balt, who is cheerful, lively, fanciful and passionate. This contrast is not only reflected in the two brothers' different attitudes towards Werner but also in their respective attitudes and values towards life. Boulton's shy character may stem from his strict demands on himself and his high sensitivity to external evaluations. This character trait is well reflected in the melodies and rhythms of the music. In this suite, the earliest piece of music that depicts Boulton is the third piece, such as the thick octave in Score 2, which makes

Boult's calm and pragmatic character image more vivid and three-dimensional. By contrast, the character of Boult was an

introverted but sensitive personality, and his melodies, such as that in the third piece, showed his inner emotional depth [8].



Figure 2. Octave Analysis. Spectrum example 2.

Boult's characterisation also reflects Schumann's deep understanding of the complexity of human nature. Although Boult is shy and pragmatic, it does not mean that he lacks emotion or passion. On the contrary, his inner emotional world is equally rich and complex, only that he expresses himself in a more introverted and subtle way compared with Boult. This introverted character trait is also well reflected in the melody and rhythm of *PAPILLONS*, which makes Boult's musical image more deeply rooted in people's hearts.

Boult's characterisation in *PAPILLONS* is three-dimensional and full-bodied; he is not only a contrast to Boult in terms of character, but also a microcosm of the composer's exploration of the many facets of human nature. Through the form of music, Schumann successfully presents the character of Boult to the listener, enabling people to feel his inner emotional world and complex character.

(iii). Vina

As one of the protagonists of the suite, Schumann devotes a great deal of time to the portrayal of the heroine. Werner is a beautiful, elegant and charismatic girl, in this suite, the earliest

depiction of her music is the fifth piece, the name of "Werner" as a small piece, a vivid depiction of a beautiful and generous, dignified and gentle, but also a hint of sadness of the image of a woman, she is precisely the Walter and Boult and the object of mutual admiration. She was the object of admiration for both Walter and Boult. The work uses the popular Baroque polyphonic music composition technique to subtly highlight the calm and elegant temperament of Werner. For example, in Score 3, in the fifth piece, the musical image of Vienna is presented through the polyphonic writing technique. The high voice is elegant and soothing, as soft and sweet as Vina's whole person, which fully expresses Vina's beauty and gentleness. When playing the right-hand melody part, the performer plays with the fingers close to the keys according to the direction of the phrase and tries to make the notes before and after the melody as coherent as possible. This way of playing makes the image of Vina more fluent and coherent, as delicate and deep as her emotions. It follows then that Vina's elegance and charm, as vividly portrayed in the fifth piece through polyphonic compositional techniques, take on both a dignified and melancholic tone, the true embodiment of Romantic ideals [9].



Figure 3. High Register Analysis. Spectrum example 3.

Second, the piano suite *PAPILLONS* composition characteristics

1.2. Analysis of Song Structure

The piano suite *PAPILLONS* consists of twelve small

pieces, each with its characteristics, with independent tonality, structure and harmonic vocabulary, and the whole is in the key of D major, which is like a colourful musical scroll. Below is the analysis of the first to the eighth piece of the piano suite *PAPILLONS*.

The piece opens with a six-bar introduction, with upward

scale-like arpeggios opening the work. The first Allegro has a two-part structure, in the style of a ballad in D major, in four-three times, elegant and joyful. The second little piece, in four and two beats, is in sharp meter, E-flat major to A-flat major. The tonal shift makes for contrasting musical material. The third movement is in a single triad structure, in ascending F minor, in 4:3, with deep and varied emotions. The fourth piece is a single triad with reproduction, in A major, 8:3 beats, with a reproduction of the single triad structure, depicting the joy of the ball. The fifth piece is in B-flat major, 4:3 beats, with polyphonic compositional techniques, vividly depicting the image of Vienna. The sixth piece is in the form of a rondo, in F major, with four or three beats. The recurrence of the theme melody is like a true portrayal of Barthes' inner feelings, strongly expressing his jealousy and anger triggered by the love at first sight between Werner and Boulton, and at the same time revealing his admiration and helplessness towards Werner. The seventh piece is in the key of F minor, 8:3, with a clever combination of melody and accompaniment, which vividly portrays Boulton's desire to exchange masks with his brother to dance with Werner. The eighth piece is in parallel two-part form, ascending c minor to descending D major, four-three beats, with the main chord progression unfolding, and the music is full of affectionate confessions and expectations. The suite comprises 12 pieces, each with distinct tonalities and emotional content. Together, they form a musical narrative that encapsulates Romantic ideals [10].

1.3. Analysis of Musical Styles

1.3.1. Influence of Literature

During the Romantic period, composers tended to combine music with other art forms, especially literature, to emphasise emotional expression. Deeply influenced by the Romantic literary trend of the time, Schumann had a great passion for implied and hidden imagery. In his piano suite *PAPILLONS*, the butterfly is imbued with symbolism of beauty, lightness and grace. In the process of breaking the cocoon into a butterfly, the butterfly transforms darkness into light, and this metamorphosis symbolises hope and freedom. Therefore, the butterfly represents a deep emotion and inner voice in Schumann's work.

The birth of *PAPILLONS* was influenced by the novel. In the piano suite *PAPILLONS*, Schumann uses music to vividly express this plot, completing the transformation from imagination to reality. Through the fusion of literature and music, it breaks through the limitation of words, and also expands the imagination space of the listener, so that the listener can feel the emotion and meaning conveyed by the work more deeply. The work of Schumann well portrays the Romantic era's tendency to combine literature and music. The butterfly imagery is symbolic of transformation and hope, and that is exactly what *Papillons* conveys [11].

1.3.2. Romantic Style Embodiment

Freedom of individuality is the essence of the Romantic art style, which coincides with the richness and depth of Schumann's inner world. Due to his upbringing, he was introverted and sensitive. Since he came into contact with the piano and gradually penetrated the field of composition, he found an outlet for his emotions and gradually poured them into his music. As a result, his works are full of ups and downs, full of deep feelings, and become a true reflection of his emotional world. As an outstanding representative of the romanticism style, Schumann's piano suite *PAPILLONS* fully demonstrates his artistic characteristics. In this work, he cleverly integrates literature and title, delicately depicting the inner world of musical characters, with lyrical melodies and rich harmonic colours. The obviousness of the change of intensity makes the rhythm more rhythmic so that the listener seems to be able to go deeper into it and experience the ups and downs of emotions together with the musical characters. At the same time, his compositions show the qualities of passion, perseverance and heroism, and are full of uplifting power, which is one of the reasons why he has been called a "musical madman", highlighting the Romantic qualities of his works. The music of Schumann fully represents the Romantic character: lyricism of melodies, rich harmony, and deeply expressive. This can be well observed in *Papillons*, testifying to his mastery of Romantic idioms [12].

2. Historical Context

2.1. The Romantic Era and Piano Suites

Schumann's *Papillons* (Op. 2) was composed in 1831, during the early Romantic period—a time when emotional expression, individuality, and connections to literature flourished in music. Romantic composers sought to create works that went beyond the formal structures of the Classical period, exploring personal emotions and programmatic themes.

2.2. Schumann's Literary Inspirations

Papillons was inspired by Jean Paul Richter's novel *Flegeljahre*. Schumann was deeply influenced by literary works, particularly those of Jean-Paul, Goethe, and E.T.A. Hoffmann. *Papillons* reflects the novel's carnival setting, where contrasting scenes and moods unfold like a series of vignettes, mirroring Richter's narrative styles. Elements in Romantic Music Schumann was among the pioneers of programmatic music—compositions that tell a story or depict an image. *Papillons* exemplifies this approach through its episodic structure, which portrays a masquerade ball with shifting characters and dances. The suite's whimsical and contrasting movements anticipate Schumann's later masterpiece, *Carnaval*.

2.3. Schumann's Written During Schumann's Early Career

Papillons showcases his innovative approach to the piano. It combines virtuosic elements with poetic expressiveness, reflecting his dual identity as a composer and a writer. His music often conveys literary allusions, a feature seen in many Romantic piano works, such as those by Liszt and Chopin [11].

3. Piano Suite *PAPILLONS* Performance Technique Analysis

3.1. Integration of "Imagination" and Performance

The piano suite *PAPILLONS* is based on a literary work and realises a subtle fusion of music and literature. To perform this work well, the performer needs to have a deep understanding of the meaning of the work and what each title is trying to convey. In the process of playing, the musical elements such as pitch, rhythm, melody and timbre are transformed into vivid musical images and storylines through the

use of imagination. By immersing yourself in these inner scenarios, you will be able to understand and grasp the work more deeply, which in turn will enhance your expressiveness and make your performance more in tune with the essence of the work.

For example, the second cadenza (see Score Example 4) depicts Barth's entrance, and when playing it, one can imagine the chaos of Barth mistakenly entering the cloakroom because he can't find the dance floor. The *ff* chord arpeggios upwards in the opening of the piece require the player to play with a clear granularity to ensure a full tone and smooth playing. From the fourth measure onwards, the right hand is in diatonic legato and appoggiatura rhythm, which requires the player to grasp the touch technique of the diatonic legato, so that the second note is played both short and briskly. The left hand's super-octave progressions echo harmonically with the right hand. To accurately play the large left-hand part, you need to keep your wrist relaxed and your fingertips stable while playing. Imagination plays a huge role in performing Papillons. A performer needs to feel internally the literary and emotional text to provide a living, breathing voice to the music. For example, Barth's entrance is illustrated with *ff* arpeggios in the second piece; nuance is required to provide the character of Barth's vitality [13].



Figure 4. Analysis of the Second Little Piece. Spectrum example 4.

3.2. Control of Intensity

Schumann's compositions are deeply influenced by Bach's polyphonic music, which is fully reflected in the piano suite *PAPILLONS*, from two-voice, three-voice to multi-voice, the music is richly layered, which shows the complexity of Schumann's inner emotions and contradictions. To play this work with high quality, the performer needs to be very sensitive to the strength. In the process of playing, the player needs to pay great attention to the control of the horizontal strength of the melody and the balance of the vertical strength of the polyphony.

For example, the fifth piece is a polyphonic melodic dance, which requires a clear contrast in intensity between the melody and the harmony. (See example 5.) When playing, the right hand should use 4 or 5 fingers to touch the keys, and the

belly of the fingers should go deep into the bottom of the keys, starting softly, gradually increasing the volume and lengthening the phrases, and at the same time, with the fluctuation of the melody, the intensity of the horizontal changes should be controlled with finesse. The sound should be soft clear, and full of emotion. The left hand is responsible for the vertical control of the harmony. For the low part and the main melody, use the little finger and ring finger to ensure that the keys are touched to the bottom, creating a heavy sound effect; while for the middle two parts, it is appropriate to use one or two fingers to lightly touch and play, and strive to be clear and crisp, with fine control of the intensity, to be able to fully demonstrate the layering of this piece of music, "Vina". Schumann's polyphonic textures necessitate precise dynamic control to balance the horizontal and vertical forces within the music [14].



Figure 5. Analysis of the Fifth Little Piece. Spectrum example 5.

3.3. Use of Pedals

In the piano suite *PAPILLONS*, the use of the right pedal is divided into two main categories. The first is the straight pedal, which is pressed at the same time as the notes to avoid dryness of the tone and to make the sound effect full; the second is the pedal after the notes, which is pressed after the notes have been played to make the sustaining effect. When playing this piece, the performer must use the pedal skillfully and appropriately according to the connotation of the work and the demand for acoustic effects. As Schumann was deeply influenced by Bach, his works are not overly labelled in terms of pedal usage [15]. The melodies in *PAPILLONS* are often sung, so the performer must interpret them with fullness and consistency according to the nature of the music, and use the pedals in the right places with precision to bring out the fullness of the music.

For example, in the first four bars of the first little piece, the melody is as smooth as a stream, giving a pleasing enjoyment to the ear. The melodic voices make skilful use of legato so that the notes are connected as if they were silk threads. When playing the first measure, it is especially important to note that the first note should be synchronised with the movement of the right pedal, just like the beginning steps in a dance, which should be precise and powerful. In the next two beats, the release of the pedal needs to be gradual, to avoid the tone being too sticky and to keep the music fresh and flowing. Entering the second measure, the player is confronted with three separate octave chords. At this point, the player should use the after-tone pedal technique, i.e., pedal after the chord is voiced, so that the chords sound more mellow and flow naturally, just like drops of water rolling on a lotus leaf, leaving beautiful traces [16]. When the piece progresses to the 9th to 10th bars, the appearance of skipping notes injects new vigour into the piece. At this point, the pedal should be pressed down in time with the first note, and then quickly raised to ensure that each skipping note is voiced clearly and sharply, like a joyful dance step, light and powerful. The linking markings reappear in the following two bars. Here we can adopt the treatment of using the pedal once per measure. This not only maintains the coherence of the music but also gives the music a breather at the right time, making the performance more lively and expressive. (Example 6, in which "p" is for pedal

down and "x" is for pedal up) By using the pedal in this way, we can better express the layers and variations of the piece. Each pedal press down and lift is a delicate interpretation of the music, performing more depth and infectiousness. The pedal techniques in the *Papillons* involve a refined balance between sustaining and letting go of the notes as part of the music flow. For example, the use of both direct and after-tone pedalling is used to enhance lyricism in the first piece [17].



Figure 6. Pedal Analysis. Spectrum Example 6.

4. Conclusion

Schumann's piano suite *PAPILLONS* is a shining gem of Romantic music. The study provides an in-depth understanding of the emotional connotations embedded in the work. Combining literature and music, Schumann presents a complex emotional story of love and betrayal, hope and disappointment through the portrayal of the three characters of Barth, Boulton and Werner. From the subtle design of the compositional structure to the delicate portrayal of the musical style, it shows Schumann's unique understanding of music. The influence of literature and the grasp of the Romantic style make the piano suite *PAPILLONS* a classic. The performance requires a high level of technical support, as well as the player's understanding of the work's connotations and emo-

tional commitment. The fusion of "imagination" and playing, the control of strength, and the skilful use of the pedal are the keys to a successful performance of *PAPILLONS*.

Through the in-depth study of the piano suite *PAPILLONS*, the author has a more comprehensive understanding of Schumann's musical talent and creative concepts, and also feels the emotion and artistic value of the work. The piano suite *PAPILLONS* is not only a test of the fusion of imagination and playing technique, but also a purification of the performer's mind.

Author Contributions

Kuang Ziyu is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to report.

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