

Translating Robert Schumann: methodology as self-exposure and defense

Abstract

This paper is part of a broader research project¹, which involves the Brazilian Portuguese translation, with notes and commentaries, of the *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker (On Music and Musicians)* by the German composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856). In such a study, located on the border of language, literature, and music, methodology gains a double significance: firstly, the nature and extent of the incursions through fields which are autonomous in themselves, but connected in the document to be translated, not only requires unity, but also reveals the gaps the translator is exposed to; and secondly, the methodology not only defines the scientific premises of the work, but also brings to light its ethical dimension. With this in mind I have chosen a methodological approach which works in two complementary ways, with the act of translating always being the point of departure and arrival: (1) from the experience of translation and the identification of gaps and problems, followed by the registration of the first notes and comments, through systematic research in connected areas; and (2) the opposite way: from the research in related fields back to the translation and to the editing of notes and comments. Each step of the process is carefully registered, as well as the different versions of the translated text. Allowing methodology to take precedence is therefore an act of self-exposure and defense: on the one hand, it is a means of assuring visibility for the translator; on the other hand, it secures concrete parameters for judgment both by readers and critics.

Key-words: Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, translation methodology, translation as knowledge building.

¹ “Robert Schumann e as Letras: os *Escritos sobre a Música e os Músicos* – apresentação, tradução e notas” [Robert Schumann and Literature: *On Music and Musicians* – introduction, translation and notes], sponsored by the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) through a Research Productivity Scholarship (PQ), level II (Proc. nº 305302/2009-4).

Translating Robert Schumann: methodology as self-exposure and defense

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In 1852, Robert Schumann, already weakened by the disease that would take his life two years later, collected his critical writings, originally published between 1834 and 1844 in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (from now on, NZfM), in a last effort to leave an ordered collection of his critical output for future generations. In Schumann's own words, collecting these articles in two volumes², was prompted by a wish to "(...) gather in a single book these scattered pages, as a memorial to those years [as a writer] and to myself³" (Jansen 1904: 474s.).

On this legacy and its relation with the German literature of the first half of the 19th century, Gerd Nauhaus, a student of Schumann's literary production, who transcribed the four volumes of his *Diaries* and was for a number of years Director of the Robert Schumann House and Museum, Zwickau, Saxony, says:

(...) *On Music and Musicians* [from now on *On Music*] reflects the exciting cultural period extending from 1830 to 1850. As well as its value for the history of music, one should stress its literary value, testified by the inclusion of Schumann's writings in the anthologies of German literature edited by Hugo von Hoffmansthal, W. Killy and S. Hermelin (Nauhaus 1988: 42).

² Initially, four volumes, later rearranged in two larger volumes: the first volume includes Books 1 (reviews from 1834 to part of 1836) and 2 (reviews from part of 1836 to 1838); the second volume includes Books 3 (reviews from part of 1838 to 1840) and 4 (reviews from 1841 to 1843 "and later").

³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

In fact, from the moment they were first published in 1854, these two volumes, totaling 1210 pages⁴, have been studied by musicologists and historians as a major portrait of the German musical and aesthetic scene in the first half of the 19th century. Besides its value as an essential document for 19th century music historiography, Schumann's *On Music* also reveals an intricate set of relations with past and contemporary writers, both foreign and German. Therefore, it is also of interest to literary historiography.

The research project of which this essay is a part may be defined as an effort towards the historical revitalization of a document, taking the form of a commented and annotated translation of all critical texts collected by Schumann in *On Music*. This translation is accompanied by a set of essays⁵ discussing Schumann's relationship with literature in the light of concepts derived from German Romanticism – literature, translation, and aesthetics – and basic principles of musical criticism. The nature of this project is thus multidisciplinary; however, here I have chosen the perspective of translation, not as an auxiliary activity, but rather as a primary matrix, generating and disseminating new knowledge, a bridge spanning the distance between the worlds of early 19th century German culture and 21st century Brazilian culture.

In shedding some light on the complex interface between the music and literature of this period, these essays, together with the annotated translation, are directed to professionals in both areas: on the one hand, they suggest new outlooks to approaching literature from music, and, on the other, they encourage musicologists to be informed by literature in their musical analysis.

Methodological orientation; partial results⁶

⁴ This is the number of pages in the reprint (1985) of the original edition, first published 1854.

⁵ Preliminary versions of these essays were published in Azenha 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b.

⁶ This section presents partial results of the project, which were gathered and systematized in my postdoctoral thesis, presented at the Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas of the University of São Paulo between June 29th and July 1st 2009. Besides published essays, Book I of *On Music* (reviews from 1834 to part of 1836) has been translated, along with the corresponding notes, 1 to 235, in Martin Kreisig's edition (1914).

Translation has been made along two lines. First, translation as reconsidered in its historical perspective, that of a primary matrix for knowledge building and dissemination, and, second, the perspective of literature – rather than that of musical historiography or musicology. These two perspectives determine the form and extent of the focal points chosen in this study located on the borderline area of language, literature, translation and music.

My interactive methodology works in two directions: (1) from translation, including initially unsystematic notes, to theoretical study, in order to account for the environment and features of Schumann's writing; (2) the opposite: from reading and reflection back to the revision of the translation and the systematical rearrangement of notes, in accordance with the aims of the work. It is an eclectic method, which is developed and redefined as new input becomes necessary.

As to the method of translating, more specifically, I find support in Schumann's *On Music*⁷ itself to place in contraposition two conceptions of translation prevailing at his time, which, by the way, confirm the old dichotomy of translating (and interpreting) the sense, and translating (and sticking to) the word. I have thus adopted the former: that of creative *transformation*, mediated by a subject's potential in seeking to recover a style and underline the literariness in Schumann's text as, for instance, when reproducing metaphors and the stimulating conciseness of his aphorisms.

The two directives mentioned above, therefore, are designed to bring out peculiarities in Schumann's writing, the literary elements of his criticism, and also help create a new public for the reception of Schumann's work in Brazil, which is the almost exclusive preserve of music students and scholars, with his critical and literary legacy is little known.

In order to do so, the examination of Schumann's *On Music* as translated into other languages was part of the study. The French, English, and Spanish translations⁸ with which I have been acquainted in the course of the research include only a scanty

⁷ Robert Schumann, who could translate some classical and modern languages [see my *Robert Schumann, tradutor* (2002)], introduces remarks on translation in some of his reviews.

⁸ Cf. Bibliography.

selection of reviews, and almost all of them have major gaps springing from lack of perception. Thus, I could notice they were informed by a simplifying methodology, which, in making unintelligible major passages in the texts, creates difficulties for their reception, and by a discrete musical canon dictating the choice of reviews dealing with famous composers. In this way, the suppressed reviews either reveal Schumann's strong connection with the Romantic universe and tradition or deprive the reader of an opportunity to see how conscientious, careful, and punctilious Schumann was as a music critic.

Also, a comparison not purporting to be exhaustive shows that many of these translations were made from other languages, not German. Not that the adoption of a "triangular" procedure in translation may be considered a shortcoming in itself. However, it can be noticed that this simplifying methodological strategy has perpetuated in other languages and cultures the same inaccuracies and improprieties found in the versions used for translation, not to mention the selection of composers which is very much the same in all of them.

In addition, in an attempt to review the progress of *On Music* and adjust the aims of my translation, I have chosen the questioning of methodology as both the starting point and the end of my work. The first decision prompted by this choice was that of including in my project Martin Kreisig's notes to his 1914 edition of *On Music*. Features of this edition and the justification for its inclusion as a basic element in the research are described below.

Martin Kreisig's critical edition (1914)

Martin Kreisig (1856-1940), German educationalist and founder of the Robert Schumann Museum and Society, replaced Friedrich Gustav Jansen (1831-1910), Schumann's contemporary and the first critic to compile, arrange and critically revise Robert Schumann's papers, in the task of reissuing *On Music*. Jansen died four years before the publication of Kreisig's edition, and his work, highly commended by Kreisig in his preface, is directly connected with sources provided by the composer himself.

Kreisig's work descends directly from Jansen's; moreover, in his capacity as Director of the Schumann Museum, he was able to examine Schumann's manuscripts and essays as published in the NZfM. This enabled him to connect Schumann's text as published in the journal and in its final form, after the revision undertaken by the composer upon his decision to collect his scattered writings in book form. According to Kreisig (p. VI), his notes record commentaries and deviations from the first edition (here, the reprint), not included by Schumann in his final edition, as evinced through comparison with the text originally published in the NZfM.

In comparing the revised texts with those originally published in the NZfM, the main contribution of Kreisig's edition is spelling out what Schumann only implies: the editor reestablishes relationships between composers and between composers and publishers; he mentions names and features of forgotten journals, points to inaccuracies as to dates of concerts, authorship, and the publication of certain works, presents an inside view of famous controversies, and shows differences between rival music journals.

In view of all this, Kreisig's edition may be considered a synthesis of everything that had been produced about *On Music* in the 19th century, not only because it is connected with direct sources from the time Schumann was editing his writings, in 1852/1853, but also because it recovers all transformations made by Jansen's four editions and the critical response elicited by these editions in musical circles during the second half of the 19th century.

The decision to include Kreisig's notes in the project produced a complex reflective frame for the translation: initially, from 1852 to 1854, Robert Schumann decided to gather his critical writings in two volumes, each of them comprising two books. But he did not limit himself to compiling. He cast a retrospective and critical gaze on his past, twenty years before the time of his revision, and proceeded to correct, augment and suppress. Then Kreisig, in 1914, compared Schumann's final texts with those first published in the NZfM and recorded these developments in his notes. And finally this translation seeks not only to reconstruct the contents of *On Music* but also to recover and present this process.

Following from this, many issues regarding method had to be addressed in order to allow for the inclusion of these notes: from the difficulties involving the insertion into the Brazilian translation of passages suppressed by the composer (with all adjustments entailed) to cross-references, i.e., references, within notes, to other notes, other parts of Kreisig's edition, and all the composer's remaining papers (his *Diaries*, letters, literary projects etc.) As might be expected, several voices are blended within the notes appended to Schumann's text, and this, while being necessary for intelligibility, must not be a stumbling block for the reader's enjoyment of the literary, narrative element in Schuman's reviews.

In order to reconcile these two aspects, I have established a clear distinction between Schumann's texts and those of the commentators completing and explaining them. Thus notes were separated into three broad groups: [S.N.] for "Schumann's Notes" (part of his original text), [K.N.] for "Kreisig's Notes", from his 1914 critical edition, and [T.N.] for "Translator's Notes", comprising all remaining notes and commentaries. When further clarifications are needed within commentators' notes, in expanding names mentioned in shortened form either by Schuman or Kressig, or providing birth and death dates etc., these come within square brackets.

One of the main difficulties of adding translator's notes [N.T.] was to determine whether my uncertainties would be shared by my potential readers. Preparing translator's notes, as well as being the moment of highest visibility and self-exposure, is located round the uncertain border between encyclopedic and specific knowledge. A text that explains itself too much runs the risk of becoming dull for a fair share of its readers, who will feel insulted by being shown what they already know. But the opposite is also true: the assumption of knowledge may cause passages to become semantically opaque. In short this is the insoluble issue of determining the extent to which translator and reader share knowledge on a subject.

So, at this point, in a study intended for a diversified audience of musical experts and students of literature, I accepted the risk of incorporating into the translation all notes on which I had drawn up in reconstructing Schumann's text. Conceived in this

way, translator's notes not only publicly expose my doubts and uncertainties, but also record the perspective from which I see Schumann's work and relate it to literature. Being a work in progress, only at a later moment, when critically reading the translation of all four books, for instance, will I have the means to thoroughly reexamine this subject. And when this translation is published, other factors involved in book production, will have to be taken into account. However, this is an area in translation where objectivity yields to common sense, insight, and experience. After all, spelling out everything which is only implied by Schumann seems to run counter to his own intentions: to make readers listen to music informed by literature and read sounds. In my view, this is what his writings seem to do.

Schumann's writing and the literary intertext

It would not be feasible to quote and comment all references to literature contained in the first book of *On Music*⁹. It would be more correct to say that Schumann continued his project of transforming his massive reading into an endless source for creation. *On Music*, like all his musical work, testifies to his ease within both realms and how he subordinated his universe of experience to them.

In his reviews, Schumann draws on literary references when he wants to introduce shades of meaning into his opinion on the works and composers he is writing about. His writing is therefore marked by the subjectivity and uniqueness of literary experience: in invoking a poet, a literary work, a line to convey his considerations, he does so based on the meaning he derived from reading them, and therefore on the impression caused by this literary experience.

The subjective element in Schumann's writing comes with an assumption: in order to experience the composer's criticism at a deeper level, one has not only to read what he read, but also share his judgment and accept the associations he establishes. In all his writings, there seems to be a yearning for the absolute, for sharing impressions with a group of initiates with whom he thoroughly identifies and for whom there is no

⁹ A preliminary survey indicates 53 instances of explicit allusion to works or passages by a variety of authors, from Classical Antiquity to Schumann's contemporaries.

need for explanation – the *Davisbund* (David's Fellowship), for instance, where he appears under the heteronyms of Eusebius, Florestan and Master Raro. It seems that Schumann did not think that a work may elicit different impressions and associative networks from different readers or considered that his form of interpretation might differ from those of others. It is an outlook at odds with his wish to bequeath a work to posterity.

Though obvious to us, it apparently went unheeded when Schumann decided to revisit his writings and collect them into a book some twenty years after having written them. That opinions change over time, including his own, is apparent when we find in Kreisig what Schumann had rewritten or suppressed in his final text. On the other hand, the experience of translating and commenting Book I of *On Music* shows that at least in one point Schumann took pains to be condescending towards his future readers: in his tendency to generalize. Curiously enough, sometimes this is accomplished at the expense of the technical element in his reviews. Thus, together with the features mentioned above, generalization is here an aid to outline a form of criticism which is very distant from the critical model we want to see in practice today.

Subjectivity, the assumption of knowledge, and an inclination to generalize: these three features in Schumann's writing forced me to reassess my strategies and give precedence to methodological adjustments in the project. It was through reflection on methodology that I could better understand the successes and failures of previous editions, reflect on the reception process of the work, and define a strategy to relocate the work within the Brazilian reception system. Anyway, in all cases, reflection on methodology allows for the establishment of a direction, an acceptance of the risks entailed by this choice, and the definition of concrete parameters for the assessment of the work by readers and critics. It also allows us to recognize methodology as the main path between the specific and the general: not only among discrete translation options and their possible effects on readers, but also between the act of consciously becoming visible in translation, exposure, and that of gathering arguments to face the possibility of being (or not) accepted by readers, the defense.

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Obs.: Dates provided after authors' names refer to the editions used in this work and do not always correspond to first edition.

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