

## ROBERT ALEXANDER SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

### Im wunderschönen Monat Mai - The wondrous lovely month of May



Robert Schumann (1820-1856) was a German composer. In addition to songs, he wrote a great deal of piano music, but had to abandon hope of a career as a pianist after damaging his hand with a homemade device which was designed to strengthen his fingers – and failed! As a young man, Schumann fell madly in love with Clara Wieck, the young daughter of a Leipzig piano teacher who objected violently to their romance – understandably, perhaps, since Clara was 9 years younger than Robert, and her father was training her to be a great concert pianist. Clara was, in fact, to become a very celebrated pianist and outlived Robert by 40 years, dying in 1896.

When Clara and Robert were finally able to get married, Schumann celebrated with an extraordinary outpouring of song, and 1840 is known as his ‘year of song’.

The next two songs are taken from a collection of 16 songs (a ‘song cycle’) called ‘Dichterliebe’ (A poet’s love). The poems do not tell a direct story, but follow the ups and downs (especially downs!) of a very sensitive poet’s love affair. It is clear that the poet’s initial happiness turns to despair after the girl finds somebody else. Despite his happiness at the time, Schumann clearly identifies himself with the poet (Heinrich Heine), perhaps remembering the hard path which led to his marriage, or possibly realising how fragile love can be.

‘Im wunderschönen Monat Mai’ is the very first song and describes the dawn of love which coincides with the blossoming of nature and the return of the birds. This poetic tendency to find one’s mood reflected by nature and one’s surroundings is known as ‘pathetic fallacy’. We all do it at times – we are happier when the sun comes out and fed up when it pours with rain, for example.

Despite the happy words of the poem and the smooth flow of the music, there are already unsettling aspects to the music. The use of ‘suspensions’ – where one note is held over while a new harmony appears below it – could represent the tremulous expectation of the poet as Spring arrives, but it means that the music is never allowed to settle down. Even at the very end, there is no closure on a simple chord, but a spread ‘dominant seventh’ which is utterly inconclusive; in fact, this chord is resolved only when the second song begins – an excellent example of linking songs in a song cycle.

*Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,  
Als alle Knospen sprangen,  
Da ist in meinem Herzen  
Die Liebe aufgegangen.*

*Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,  
Als alle Vögel sangen,  
Da hab' ich ihr gestanden  
Mein Sehnen und Verlangen.*

*Heinrich Heine (1797-1856)*