

Hummel and the Romantics

THE CLASSICAL COMPOSER AND KEYBOARDIST INFLUENCED A WHOLE GENERATION OF YOUNGER ARTISTS

JOHANN NEPOMUK HUMMEL is best known as a Classical composer, the last great representative of the style of Haydn, Mozart, and early Beethoven. Indeed, Hummel's credentials as a Classicist are impeccable. Born in 1778, he studied with Mozart between 1786 and 1788 and was regarded throughout Europe as his most famous pupil, a label Hummel wore with pride until his death in 1837. The English journal *Harmonicon* even dubbed him "the modern Mozart of Germany" in 1825.

Hummel's connections to Haydn and Beethoven were equally strong: he was Haydn's protégé and successor at Esterháza, and Beethoven's close friend and chief competitor in Vienna.

There is another Hummel, however, one far less well known or appreciated: Johann Nepomuk Hummel, the Romantic. As the greatest virtuoso pianist of his era, and one of its most popular composers, he played an important role in the lives and musical development of those artists who symbolize what we now call the Romantic style. Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, and particularly Chopin were unabashed admirers of Hummel and freely acknowledged their debt to this brilliant musician and fascinating figure in the history of music. This article will offer a brief glimpse into Hummel's impact on these four geniuses.

Franz Schubert

Hummel and Schubert met only once, at a dinner in Vienna

in 1827. Hummel had rushed to the Austrian capital to be at the side of the dying Beethoven, and he made four visits to his old friend's deathbed. The meeting with Schubert was decidedly more upbeat, but equally memorable.

Schubert must have been delighted to finally have personal contact with the composer of music he had known and admired for more than a decade. After all, Hummel had lived in Vienna for many years and still enjoyed a huge popularity there as a composer and pianist. One of the works that Schubert knew quite well was Hummel's Septet in D minor, op. 74, his most popular chamber music composition. Schubert, in fact, used the quintet version of this work as the model for his famous Trout Quintet. The solo piano music that



Schubert composed between 1816 and his death in 1828 also reveals the strong influence of Hummel's brilliant, virtuosic style of piano writing, culminating in the last three piano sonatas (D. 958-60). Schubert intended to dedicate these works to Hummel



but died before they were published. When Diabelli finally brought them out in 1838, Schubert and Hummel had both passed away, so he made the practical business decision to dedicate these works to Schumann.

Robert Schumann

In a letter written in 1854, Robert Schumann reflected on the ideal "multi-faceted refined composer-virtuosos." Topping the list were Hummel, Moscheles, and Chopin, whom he called "the most beloved players." Schumann's inclusion of Hummel might evoke some surprise. Why would the Romantic era's most ardent and vocal advocate for the progressive in music bestow the highest praise on a composer that he had frequently categorized as an old-fashioned relic of the Classical style?

by Mark Kroll

For one thing, the young Schumann, the aspiring virtuoso pianist studying with Friedrich Wieck in Leipzig in 1829, desperately wanted to become Hummel's student. Despite repeated attempts, he never realized this goal, but Hummel would remain Schumann's idol throughout his student years. He was also his role model, as we read in Schumann's letter to his mother of 15 May 1831: "I can have only four goals: Kapellmeister, music teacher, virtuoso and composer. With Hummel, for example, all of these are combined." Schumann's diary also tells us that he practiced Hummel's *Clavierschule* with a devotion bordering on obsession, once even writing that he planned to play all the exercises in succession. There are over 4,000 in the *Clavierschule!*

Schumann did not realize that goal either, and he eventually moved on to become, well, Robert Schumann. Nevertheless, he maintained a lasting admiration for a select group of Hummel's works, such as the piano concertos in A minor and B minor, the Septet in D minor, op. 74, and the Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor, op. 81. The F-sharp minor sonata had a particularly significant impact on



Schumann's early piano compositions, as can be seen by the striking similarity of the examples below (Fig. 1).

Schumann acknowledged his admiration for Hummel's F-sharp minor sonata in his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* of April 26, 1839, predicting, "this sonata will alone immortalize his name."

Franz Liszt

At first glance, the pairing of Hummel and Franz Liszt might seem even more surprising than Hummel's pairing with Schumann. Granted, the two men were virtuoso pianists, and both served as the Kapellmeister in Weimar – Hummel from 1819-1837 and Liszt from 1842-1860. They even lived on the same street in Weimar, but it would still appear that Hummel and Liszt occupied entirely different worlds. Liszt, with his glamorous and flamboyant stage persona, was the first piano superstar, while Hummel remained the respectable model of sobriety and family values. The perceptive critic François-Joseph Fétis acknowledged this in 1840 when he wrote: "there are also things one finds in Liszt's playing that are of quite another nature, and his genius is the most complete deviation... from the school of Hummel that one can imagine." Although Fétis was describing Liszt's style of playing the piano, he could just as easily have been writing about every other aspect of Liszt's life and personality. Nevertheless, it is necessary to delve only just beneath the surface to discover that the lives and music of Hummel and

to Weimar to study with his old friend, who by that time had become one of Europe's pre-eminent piano teachers. This never happened, but Hummel's music played a major role in Liszt's early career. Like every pianist of the 19th century who hoped to launch a solo career, Liszt made his debut playing Hummel's Piano Concerto in A minor, op. 85. The performance in Vienna's Landständischen Saale on December 1, 1822, had the critics reeling.



One wrote: "The little magician dealt with the numerous difficulties of Hummel's A-minor concerto, rich with difficul-

ties, with a polish that was imposing even for the Viennese." Another claimed that "The performance of this boy, for his age, borders on the incredible, and one is tempted to doubt any physical impossibility when one hears the young giant, with unabated force, thunder out Hummel's composition, so difficult and fatiguing, especially in the last movement."

Liszt again turned to a Hummel piano concerto for his debut in Paris on March 7, 1824, this time the Piano Concerto in B minor, op. 89, in a concert that featured some pure "Lisztian" theater. The young virtuoso must have been attacking the piano with particular force and enthusiasm, because the *AMZ* reported that he broke several strings in the middle of the performance and the pitch of the instrument sank one-half step. The concert had to be stopped while a technician was called in to retune the instrument and replace the strings, but after the necessary repairs were made, Liszt resumed his concerto as if nothing had happened.

Liszt also admired Hummel's other compositions, including the Septet, op. 74, which became a staple in Liszt's repertoire well into the 1840s. He even made a solo piano arrangement of the work, and he explained his admiration for the Septet in detailed analytical terms: "The logical progression of this work, the majesty of his style, the clarity

Fig. 1

Example 1a: Hummel, Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor, op. 81 III, mm. 68-69

Example 1b: Schumann: Toccata, op. 7, mm. 3-5

Fig. 2

Example 2a: Hummel, Piano Sonata in D major, op. 106/III, mm. 17-20

Example 2b: Chopin, Nocturne in A-flat major, op. 32, no. 2, mm. 5-6

and flexibility of his ideas make [this work] easy to understand. Moreover, each passage has so many individual details that they never fail to have an [excellent] effect.”

The roots of Liszt’s compositional style for the piano – the extensive use of ornamentation and keyboard coloratura, the brilliant passage work written in small notes – can be traced to the piano music of Hummel and his contemporaries. The approach of the two virtuosos to the keyboard may also have been more similar than we think. William Mason, one of Liszt’s American pupils, tells us in his book *Touch and Technique* (1889) that Liszt considered a “two-finger exercise” by Hummel to be the source of his technique. The exercise consisted of playing a scale with two fingers, alternating accented and unaccented notes and using an elastic touch by pulling the fingers in towards the palm.

Liszt’s high opinion of Hummel as an artist and as a man never diminished. It is evident in a letter he wrote to Weimar’s Grand Duke Carl Alexander in 1860, reminding his employer that “he should be proud to create works that resemble [Hummel’s].”

Fryderyk Chopin

The 19th-century composer who owes the most to Hummel, and with whom he enjoyed the warmest relationship, was

genuine friends. They took excursions together, such as a trip to the country home of Chopin’s beloved Dr. Malfatti in the spring of 1831,

and they visited each other as often as possible. One such visit occurred on December 22, 1830, in Vienna, when Hummel came calling with his talented nine-year-old son Carl, who went on to become a noted painter. Chopin was feeling homesick during the Christmas season, since it was the first time he was living away from Warsaw.

He was obviously moved by Hummel’s visit and by the fact that the young Carl made a drawing of him; he wrote to his parents: “Hummel came to see me yesterday with his son who has done a portrait of me, so

Chopin.

Chopin first met Hummel in Warsaw in 1828, where Hummel, the touring virtuoso, made his usual spectacular impression on the public, and even more so on the young and sensitive Polish musician.

Chopin and Hummel kept in close contact throughout their lives and became

life-like that it could not be bettered....

Hummel *père* is extraordinarily kind.”

Chopin continued to express, in both words and deeds, his admiration for Hummel. For example, on December 10, 1842, five years after Hummel’s death, Chopin would proclaim that Hummel was one of the “masters we all recognize.” It is noteworthy that the only other names on Chopin’s list were Mozart and Beethoven. Chopin also showed his high regard by using so many of Hummel’s works to teach his students, as his pupil Adolf Gutmann recalled: “Chopin held that Clementi’s *Gradus ad Parnassum*, Bach’s pianoforte fugues, and Hummel’s compositions were the key to pianoforte-playing, and he considered a training in these composers a fit preparation for his own works. He was particularly fond of Hummel and his style.”

The two great pianists were also in complete agreement on many aspects of playing the keyboard. One was fingering, a matter of great importance to Chopin,

Fig. 3

Example 3a: Hummel, Variations, op. 57, var. 4, mm. 1-8

Example 3b: Chopin, Étude, op. 72, no. 3, mm. 1-4

who wrote in his own unfinished piano method “everything is a matter of knowing good fingering.” Chopin considered Hummel to be the master of this art, writing that one should be able to produce “as many different sounds as there are fingers.... Hummel was the most knowledgeable on the subject.”

A comparison of the music of Chopin and Hummel provides even more eloquent testimony to Chopin’s admiration for Hummel and to Hummel’s influence on Chopin’s compositional style. The most obvious stylistic trait in common is the use of florid melodic gestures in the right hand,

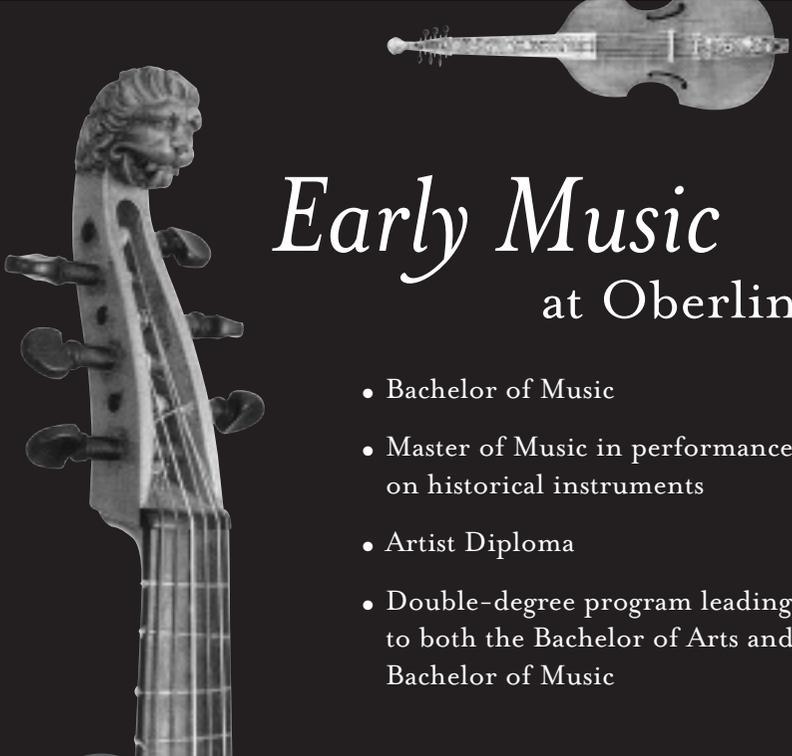


written in irregular rhythmic groups and played over a steady bass line (Fig. 2).

Chopin’s music, in fact, shares almost every other characteristic of Hummel’s style of writing for the piano. I offer only one of many possible examples (Fig. 3).

Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, and Chopin – these emblematic symbols of the Romantic era are indeed indebted to Hummel. The same can be said for many other 19th-century composers, including César Franck, who graduated as a prize-winning pianist from the Paris Conservatoire by playing Hummel’s music. Some critics have even found similarities between Hummel’s F-sharp minor sonata and the Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor, op. 2, of Brahms. Hummel the Classicist, Hummel the Romantic – both descriptions are correct. His life spanned two eras, and so did his music. ♡

Mark Kroll maintains a distinguished and multifaceted career as a performer, scholar and educator. He has toured the world as a leading harpsichordist and fortepiano player and has made over 40 recordings featuring repertoire from the 17th to the 21st centuries. Kroll was professor of music at Boston University for 25 years, where he founded and served as chair of the Department of Historical Performance. He is currently visiting professor at Northeastern University. His biography of Hummel will be published by Scarecrow Press this fall.



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