

DO YOU LIKE SCHUMANN?

Luisa Imorde in conversation with Ulrich Bumann about Robert Schumann and her debut CD “Zirkustänze”*

Schumann Forum Talk, held at the Schumann House in Bonn
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B: Well, good evening, ladies and gentlemen. [...] We have a real opening night here today, first, because it is the first CD of Luisa Imorde and second, it is the first recording of *Zirkustänze*, the *Circus Dances*, by Jörg Widmann. For Luisa Imorde, this is now, so to speak, something like a home game. She has been connected to the Schumann House and the Schumann Festival for many years, knows this grand piano really well and, I guess, she is happy with it. Can you still remember how all this started, your career at the Schumann House and the first concert here?

I: I certainly do remember entering the House in awe at the time I and this must have been around 2008, at the Schumann Festival.

B: And what did you play then? Any recollection?

I: Well, it was definitely Schumann and, in fact, his first sonata.

B: Right, now we are dealing with a brand new recording of what is called *Circus Dances*. Circus, Ms Imorde. Do you like circus?

L: Of course, I like circus. Actually, I already had a fascination for circus as a child. I myself performed circus at the time with my best

* Slightly abridged transcript of the interview which is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RymVgsN0Tk> The text transmission was taken care of by Eve Nipper, Pergamon, and the copy-editing by Ingrid Bodsch. Particulars put in [] were added by Ingrid Bodsch subsequently. [...] designates an omission in the text. ... designate significant „breaks“ during the interview. (I.B.) The Schumann Forum Talk was translated from German into English by Thomas Henninger.



Luisa Imorde at Roncalli's in Vienna (Photo: Daniel Biskup,
cf. <http://www.luisaimorde.de/kategorie/media/>)

friend and my sister, when I was still younger. Well, what actually fascinates me about circus is that you never know beforehand what is going to happen next. So, you go to the circus, you have no programme booklet, you know nothing, whereas you watch opera or listen to concerts with certain performers, whereas here, everything is new and you just do not know what it is about. In the same way, there is a lot of surprise on this CD, absolutely.

B: In preparation for this CD, according to what I read or heard from you, you once specially went to the circus to meet Mr Paul von Roncalli ...

I: Yes, indeed, I met Bernhard Paul in Vienna at the time, still before the recording. This was actually a fantastic experience because he is such a ..., well, such a fighter. He fights so much for quality and knows exactly what he wants and does everything possible to make it happen. And this I find extremely important in music, too. For the rest, I took all the pictures for the CD at Circus Roncalli, of course, because, well, it had just crossed my mind and I was so enthusiastic



Luisa Imorde and Ulrich Bumann in conversation
(Photo: Meike Böschmeyer)

about it and I thought, right, once the CD is named *Circus Dances*, why not embellish the CD with pictures from the circus and all that.

B: Circus is actually not quite without its dangers, certainly not. There is always the possibility of falling or you are otherwise in rather uncertain terrain. Would you compare this to the status of a musician, a high-performance musician?

I: Yes, indeed, funnily enough, I spoke with Jörg Widmann exactly about this as well and we are both aware that it is the same situation in the circus when you are standing on a tightrope and can just fall down anytime. It is similar with us at concerts where we have got only one chance and have no net and no double bottom, we play within exact times and also start on time. No one will ask us whether we are all right or not, it is simply irrelevant. And there it is very important for us to gather and bundle all our concentration and our emotions and to be able to call on all this at the critical moment. This is similar to the situation in the circus, I would say.

B: You said a short while ago that in the circus you never know exactly what is going to happen next or so. I guess the same happens to you, [dear audience] right here because you have no programme booklet in your hands for this evening and this is why I am just going to try to a) outline this CD and b) tell you what the order will be this evening. So, we will have a little chat about the CD which most of you have basically never heard of and we will shortly talk about some pieces you have never come across before either. In a way, this will be a premiere for you, too. Along these lines, we will try to clarify a few things here together. Now, let us say this CD has two big corner pieces. These are Schumann's *Papillons*, the Butterflies, that is, some collection of character pieces or whatever you would like to call these, and at the end there are the *Zirkustänze*, the *Circus Dances* by Jörg Widmann. This is a suite for piano. Those two corner pieces, at the beginning and the end of this CD, which are like big parentheses, you will also listen to these shortly after the interview. In the meantime, to make you understand the *Circus Dances* a bit better, I suggest we reveal a bit about the movements as they come in one after the other. There are eleven of them in total and in this case, in the case of these *Circus Dances*, it is quite good to know what they are about. You can also guess this but it is not bad to have some approximate idea. In between, there is something quite distinctive, namely *Eleven Humoresques*, again by Jörg Widmann. Those of you who know Schumann are aware that the title of humoresque is, so to speak, closely related to Schumann, and Widmann, in his composition, of course, refers to Schumann also. So much so that he even uses Schumann titles, such as "Fast zu Ernst [Almost Too Serious]" or "Lebhaft [Lively]" or so, and Luisa Imorde in a way broke these *Eleven Humoresques* on the CD by interrupting them with individual Schumann pieces from various diverse collections. From *Kinderszenen* [Scenes from Childhood], *Fantasiestücke* [Fantasy Pieces], *Davidsbündlertänze* [Dances of the League of David]. When you listen to these, you might perhaps notice, once you hear them on the CD later on, how well all this can be played together, how everything relates to each other. What I am doing here now is always very difficult. We are talking about music which should actually be listened to, but not everything in life is possible on the spur of the moment.



Jörg Widmann and Luisa Imorde (Photo: Benedikt Weingartner,
cf: <http://www.luisaimorde.de/kategorie/media/>)

Well, I found all this immensely exciting, the compilation itself – a declared Schumann friend like Widmann, and then, of course, Schumann, and all this constellation perhaps a bit under the motto of circus dances but at the same time with some humour that is found a bit everywhere. Who actually ..., well, you obviously came up with the idea yourself. Let us say, you play a lot of Schumann, that is for sure, we know about that. How does one come across Jörg Widmann? He is indeed everybody's darling in the music business because he just does an awful lot and writes very well – but, still, how did you encounter him?

I: I met him at the Salzburg Festival, that was in 2014, if I remember well, when I listened to a fantastic concert with him and the Hagen Quartet where he was playing Mozart's and Brahms's clarinet quintets with them, and that was so incredibly moving and touching that I

thought ... wow, well, whoever is capable of playing the music of that time so well, must really have understood it, and after that I started becoming seriously interested in him, that is, his compositions. At that time, the idea of a CD was not tangible at all yet but what I

B: Still, you already knew, for the first CD, Schumann by all means.

I: That is true, I was aware of this already. Right. Schumann was there already because he had simply accompanied me intensely since my childhood and was somehow extremely important to me and, of course, still is. On the other hand, I thought right away that I would not like to record the entire works of Schumann for the umpteenth time again but, instead, I thought he could perhaps be brought into a new field of tension, perhaps a dialogue with contemporary music could be generated which, well, might perhaps advance the Schumann friends a bit.

B: And then what? You listened to Widmann ...

I: Yes, and then I soon came across these *Elf Humoresken* [Eleven Humoresques] of his because this title rings a bell to all those who are at least slightly involved with Schumann, and everybody will just think, ah, Schumann. And this is how it went. Then I listened to it, got hold of the score straight away, studied it intensively and looked at the titles, and there were so many references to Schumann, although very subtle ones, that is, not striking ones ... except perhaps the titles themselves ... that I thought, wow, this is fascinating and I also find this very touching because it also clearly reveals Widmann's love for Schumann.

B: And because one would first think, OK, let us set this against Schumann's *Humoreske* [Humoresque] op. 20 ...

I: This was indeed the first idea I had, this is how it went exactly. But as Jörg Widmann said himself, he did not really relate to Schumann's *Humoresque* and, well, then I thought, OK, he does not do that but he quotes whole Schumann titles within the cycle, and this connection is probably even stronger than to Schumann's eponymous *Humoresque*, yes ... and so it happened that I started to compare these with each

other, I mean Widmann's "Almost too serious" with Schumann's "Almost too serious", to see how it was, how it matched and whether it matched at all in the end ...

B: This is then, so to speak, your very own combination, these ...

I: Absolutely. This is really a very original combination and, of course, it took me a very long time pondering over it and I also had to decide very clearly where each piece should exactly be positioned. For instance, Jörg Widmann uses many attacca transitions between the *Eleven Humoresques* and, to me, it was absolutely not right to interrupt these, that is, to pack some Schumann in between, and this means I only inserted some Schumann in between where he did not require an attacca transition to the next piece. And then I noticed this was a perfect harmonic match, as far as the sequence was concerned, and now there are always two Widmanns and one Schumann ... [laughing] ... and, yes, this is how it went on, when I also tried to exactly connect the transitions with each other. To make sure the transitions from Widmann to Widmann were not somehow disturbed by the Schumann in between but rather created bridges, I, of course, discussed and planned this in the end with Jörg Widmann in detail, because I, of course, did not want to ..., to brazenly disassemble his work and then even perpetuate this on a CD, so that ...

B: The interesting thing about this CD is that sometimes, when you listen to it without this thing [showing the CD-booklet] in your hand, you are not quite sure whether this is now Widmann or Schumann. Which does not mean that Widmann's compositions would be too classical but, still, Widmann seems rather fairly classical and Schumann fairly modern or so ... and it is so finely tuned ...

I: This is amazing indeed. Well, I could actually never listen to it myself, if you want, I did not have any recording. Nor any record of this comparison, I simply played it and also looked at it and somehow ... it was like a matter of feeling to just see whether it will work out or not. But it was also very exciting during the recording, to see that it had worked out indeed.

B: There are some brilliant transitions between Schumann and Widmann, and I can promise you will find them adorable when you listen to them. But we still have not got to the *Circus Dances*, was it actually Widmann to recommend them to you? Did he tell you to just play them or what ...?

I: This was it exactly. Once, when I was talking to Jörg Widmann on the phone about the actual origin of the whole thing, I let him know my first idea and said Widmann and Schumann would have to be there as the basis by all means, and I had already mentioned to him the *Elf Humoresken* [Eleven Humoresques] when he said all of a sudden, gosh, the *Zirkustänze* [Circus Dances]. They are so very dear to me, they were intended for Andras Schiff at the time and they have never been recorded, so, would you mind doing that? Well, funnily enough, I had the score at home already and had already looked at it because, obviously, if you are planning a CD and have already opted for Widmann, then you must at least have looked at the whole piano work of Widmann already. But that was ..., well, the decision to eventually also integrate the *Circus Dances* on the CD was helped by his turning up and saying to just do it.

B: This is now a recording which, so to speak, was probably also created a bit with the composer's input. Is that an advantage or a disadvantage? Would he meddle? Would he say, for instance, well, Luisa, gosh, this is not how I imagined it or ...?

I: Right, first of all, there was, of course, a lot of respect and even awe in front of him ..., actually each time I met him. But at the very first meeting already when I told him straight away I had not practised a lot yet, I can somehow mention this now, the idea was still so very fresh and even there, Jörg Widmann managed to leave me my freedom and also show his trust in me, so that I never had the feeling he would restrict me in any way or want something from me that would not be OK with me, although it was perhaps written so in the score. Then, when we went into the details of the works, at a time when I had, of course, practised them more and more extensively and had also been looking into them more closely, it was like ... well, I had, of course, tried to implement everything he had written in the score and

there is a lot of it ... [everybody smiling] ... there is partly a tempo change and a metronome number and a specification of nature in every fourth bar, so that it really takes you a long time to first decipher everything that is written in the score. Right, but then he was really fantastic and simply told me to carry on with it and just play a bit more freely here and there, I know how it is written but I like the way you are doing it, just do it like that and carry on with it ... [laughing]. In a word, it was pretty stimulating and inspiring.

B: Well, those *Circus Dances* which probably none of you [Ulrich Bumann is looking to the audience] has ever heard in your life, let us now focus on these a little bit more intensively. I will start with a short description by Jörg Widmann himself who thus described his Dances in the following way [reading aloud]: “[Following my darkly shaded piano intermezzi, now there are these *Circus dances*. Viewed superficially, they are, of course, more simple, cheerful and bright and even more gaudy, drastic and playful than the preceding work but, still, the dances of the circus protagonists are about a simple but profound truth which is embedded in them also. The risk for the tightrope walker of falling always remains real. There is already our childlike amazement when watching him. Not the amazement is false but that we adults think we are not allowed to do that. And the tears of the sad clown are artificial but still lifelike.” Well, amazing what composers come up with. You get the impression there is also some light melancholy tone resonating in this?

I: Indeed ...

B: Did you feel something similar when you were playing the music?

I: Well, the cycle of the *Circus Dances* is very colourful, partly perhaps even gaudy but also very melancholic. There are some passages where all of a sudden you feel somewhere taken back in time or you find yourself at some fair, and this is emotionally very strong.

B: I will just try to make you [the audience] familiar with the *Circus Dances* [taking the CD booklet]. So, there are eleven short movements lasting from 25 seconds to 4 minutes 20 seconds ... well, these

are all miniatures, very short. We will just have a quick look at the sequence to increase the listening pleasure for you in a little while ... it starts with fanfares which he obviously dedicated to Andras Schiff ...

I: Right.

B: With a slight Hungarian element ...

I: Right. Exactly. Yes.

B: Very briefly.

I: Yes, indeed.

B: Then there is some boogie woogie ...

I: It is a bit dedicated to the place of its premiere, which is New York.

B: Funnily enough, Andras Schiff, you probably know that, also embedded the *Circus Dances*, namely in Bach *Inventions* ...

I: Ah, really ...?

B : Yes, he played Bach Inventions, then Widmann, Bach Inventions, Widmann. Very funny. So, there is a first waltz and then four verses of a Homesickness song, a Bavarian waltz and a sentimental waltz. Followed by a nursery rhyme, a carousel waltz which is ... revealing, I believe, in a very subtle way, do you agree ...?

I: Yes, everybody will recognise that straight away, absolutely. [smiling]

B : There is a bit of hurdy-gurdy and so ... [ring? tone from the audience | UB laughing]. That was not it. [Everybody laughing]. That was not it. This is then followed, and we have to explain this a bit, by a fairly melancholic heaviness ... this goes a bit away from the circus, there is a Hebrew melody and a Venetian gondola song which sink, disappear or whatever, in a fairly melancholic manner. Regarding the

end, we will tell you something shortly ... [smiling at LI]. It is that these *Circus Dances* were written when Jörg Widmann was working on something really big. Namely a music theatre work called *Babylon* which was premiered at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich under the direction of Kent Nagano, a gigantic work lasting three and a half hours, with an incredible orchestral and choral apparatus. There, he simply engaged everything that could be done on stage. In a nutshell, this is actually a bit about the fall of Babylon. But it is basically also one of those usual priestess stories in opera, a love story between a priestess of the old faith and a Jew in exile. In contrast to other priestess operas like *Norma* or so, there is a happy end here. It is ... if you read the libretto, *Babylon*, I believe, is a rather highbrow thing by Mr Sloterdijk who wrote this and wasted his time with, whatever. Musically, it is adorable and it says in a review about Jörg Widmann there were composers from four centuries in his front garden. So, he is stylistically so well versed that it is a pleasure listening to him. Right! So, this Hebrew melody might be a strong reference to opera *Babylon*, would you agree ...?

I: Yes, at least a bit. And the finale also ...

B: The finale then all the more. The finale, as it says here, [reading aloud], is a Bavarian Babylonian march. [Audience laughing]. There is a carnival scene in the opera where, yes, Widmann digs into the keys and then, later on, Luisa Imorde also ... has to dig deep into the keys and cope with plenty of notes as well. Do not be startled, it is a mixture of the *Bavarian defiling march* and the funny *Woodchopper boys' song* that can also be identified there. [Luisa Imorde is laughing]. There, it is really getting rough. This is what might be a bit called humour in music. Humour in music is always a tricky issue ... I do not know how you feel about it but when you look at the concert audience, hardly anybody is laughing. People remain deadly serious. Even when a funny Haydn symphony ... Haydn was a real fun man, in the way he comes along. Or when Beethoven gets really rough. People will hardly laugh at all. Are you hoping for some laughers shortly when you will be playing the *Circus Dances* ...?

I: Oh yes, certainly. [laughing | audience laughing]. Well, I am even quite sure there will be some people around laughing this time as well because I have had some experience with the *Circus Dances* already, and they are simply humorous and there has always been someone around smiling, at least at the end.

B: Right. We are ... and also should be limited in time, as we have been told. So let us make an effort. You will shortly be listening to Luisa Imorde first playing Schumann's *Papillons* [Butterflies]. This is also a sequence and insofar also corresponds a bit to the *Circus Dances*, with their short scenes that refer to a masked ball.

I: Right. Well, they represent, so to speak, a parenthesis of the CD and also match the title, as both are dance cycles, that is, sequences of short dances by Schumann and Widmann.

B: Regarding the *Butterflies*, the fact is that Schumann ... you can interpret an awful lot in there, but he did make plenty of references. Many people say he refers to Jean Paul's novel *Flegeljahre*, that is, *The Awkward Age*, there is also this ball scene, but do you generally find it right that it should be important in music to ... to be really well versed in references? Or is it not enough to listen to it just like that ...?

I: [laughing] Whether you should just listen to it or just play it as it is? This is ...

B: Listening first. So, does the listener have to be an expert?

I: Well, no, not in the case of this CD. For my taste, this is by all means something that reveals itself if you just listen to it carefully. There is a lot of emotional intertwining which simply turns out to be harmonious at the same time. Although I guess that, being an interpreter, you should be aware of all kinds of references and also be able to recognise them, a prerequisite for this being, of course, that you are familiar with the respective works. Not only the works themselves but also their context, as otherwise it is not possible to really distinguish individual references between works. On the other hand, which I find, of course, absolutely exciting was a remark by Jörg Widmann

who thought that every expert and everyone wishing to find out more could take this CD and do research regarding what, how, where fits together in which way and regarding why, here and there and where the references are. I also find this very appealing. I was not really aware of it when the issue arose but it can now be considered a job for the listener.

B: So, would you call this a great journey of discovery for the listener?

I: Yes, perhaps ...

B: OK, let us wish you much pleasure in this. Let us put it like this!

