

# The whole true behind Schumann's self-injury. A tragedy in the life of a musical genius

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## ABSTRACT

In the field of Music History, Robert Schumann has been established as the epitome of German Romanticism. His works transcend the classical form of his predecessors and reveal his internal mental passions that strive to express themselves. In any case, his life was full of frustrations and upheavals that disturbed his mental health. Attempting to improve his piano technique led him to self-injure his right hand, which obviously affected his compositions and musical choices. The interpretations of Schumann's psychosocial disorder pertain to a wide range of possible diagnoses, from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder to brain tumor and neurosyphilis. Mercury poisoning seems just as likely.

**KEY WORDS:** Robert Schumann, self-injury, extensor tendons, hand

### Introduction

By the early 19th century, the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven reigned over mainland Europe. At that time, gifted music composers, such as Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Frédéric Chopin, and Robert Schumann, were forced to create new routes in their works, in order not to be measured against the eternal teenager from Salzburg or the creator of the unparalleled Ninth Symphony. The only way out

was simply to listen to the vibrations of their restless nature, or the intense passions that governed their thinking, and to turn them -alike alchemists- into valuable music sounds.

Robert Schumann represents German Romanticism, i.e. the movement of German-speaking countries in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that influenced Art in a variety of ways. His turbulent life, the frustrations, the mishaps, the hardships, and the upheavals that marked his earthly life, were

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certainly a source of inspiration for him and a cause for gratification for musicophiles. However, these upheavals contributed as well to his mental illness. Self-injury of his right hand, in an attempt to improve his piano technique, was a dramatic experience that narrowed his choices. As it was the case in Schumann's times, almost two centuries ago, the same issue is today a subject of scientific inquiry.

### Schumann and the dawn of Romanticism in music

Contrary to what we think, Romanticism in the field of music made its appearance before Beethoven's death. Carl Maria von Weber's versatile and sophisticated works were a pleasant surprise for musicians in the early 19th century, who were accustomed to the classic form of the creator of "*Fidelio*". Without realizing it, and completely unsuspecting, they became the creators of a new artistic expression that ventured into mental passions, intrusive conflicts, introverted interactions that needed to express themselves.

Robert Schumann was born in these interesting times in Zwickau of Saxony on 8 June 1810. His father had relocated to this town six years earlier and had opened a bookstore and, together with his brother, a publishing house. In this atmosphere, infused with the "magic of speech", young Robert was raised until his 6th year, in a loving environment with predetermined choices [1].

The first contact with the world of music took place when he began studying under the direction of organist Johann Gottfried Kuntzsch. In 1819, he met the famous pianist Ignaz Moscheles in Karlsbad and was fascinated by his pianist skills. He vowed silently to follow suit and become a virtuoso himself. While still in high school in Zwickau, his father would often invite his friends home to see and enjoy the young talent who performed an endless repertoire of works of Joseph Haydn and Carl Maria von Weber either in their original form or transcribed for small orchestra (Fig 1).

After failing to pursue his ambitious plan to study with Weber, Robert turned to literature. He was only sixteen years old and he was already directing a literary association dedicated to the propagation of the works of Schiller, Walter Scott, Byron and

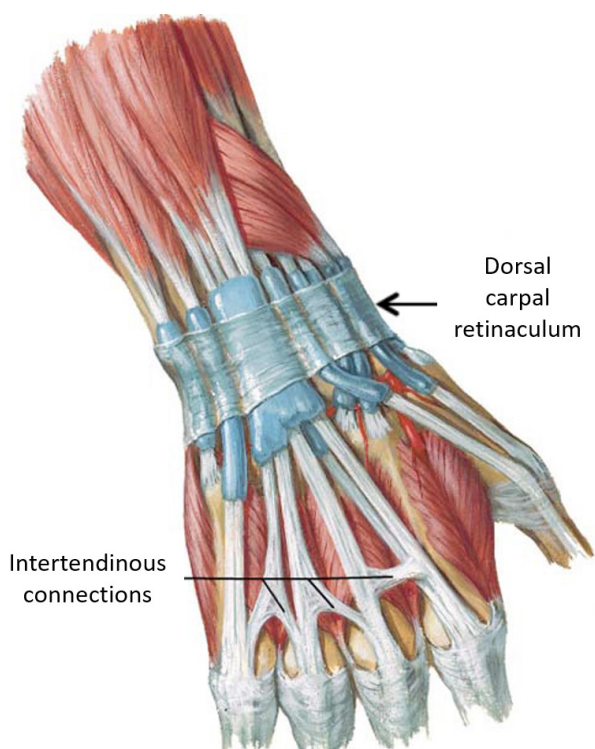


Figure 1. Robert Schumann's portrait in young age.

Jean Paul. It was then when he came across Schubert's lieder and tried to compose music based on verses of Byron, Schulze, and Eckert. However, with the death both of his father and his sister Emilie of an unknown mental illness, Robert's psychic universe suffered the first blows. At the same time, his mother's influence made him pursue law studies. It is obvious that from a very early age, this sensitive soul experienced moral challenges, discouragement, and mental anguish [2].

In 1828, at the age of 18, he moved to Leipzig to study Law. It was the same city where the echo of Johann Sebastian Bach's creative spirit was still intense. There, Robert met the famous teacher Friedrich Wieck, with whom he began piano lessons. The melancholic teenager rejoiced as soon as he saw at Wieck's house his daughter Clara, and was dazzled by her talent. This meeting sealed his destiny. He became a disciple of Wieck, stayed at his home, and was adopted by Clara with a bond that was constantly mutating and refreshing.

At the same time, he began composing his first brilliant solo piano works. In the 1830s-1840s, these attempts were the impetus for the birth of the grand compositions that made him immortal. Schumann

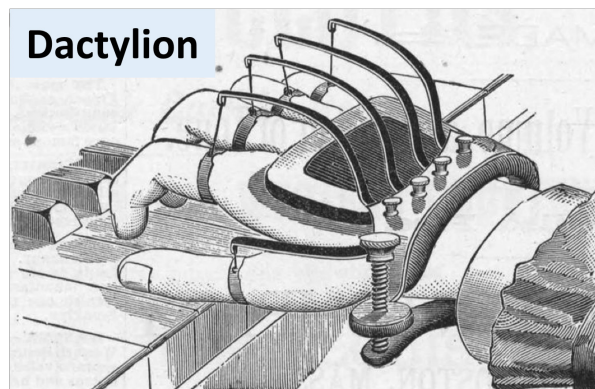


**Figure 2.** Anatomical structure of extensor tendons in a human hand.

left university for good and began collaborating with the music magazine "*Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*". However, a dithyrambic review of the then unknown Frédéric Chopin was the reason for his dismissal [3].

Following these changes, Schumann's multi-faceted and restless spirit began to move in new directions. In 1833 he founded the magazine "*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*", intending to fight by all his power the "Philistines", i.e. the conservative elite of German intellectuals of his time. Contributors to the magazine, which was to become one of the most important publications of Romanticism in music, were Mendelssohn, Friedrich Wieck, and Clara, with various strange aliases. Schumann himself was the managing director of the journal, having signed his articles as "Florestan" or "Eusebius".

While working with Friedrich Wieck, an injury, he was responsible for, did not allow him to refine his technique, but instead determined his choices and affected his mental balance in a negative way [4].



**Figure 3.** The device apparently used by Schumann for improving the independence of the fingers of his right hand and optimize his technique.

### Self-injury

The need to perfect his piano technique urged Schumann to think beyond practicing. He felt that the flexibility of the fingers in his hands was undermined by the anatomical structure of the tendons. With complete ignorance of Anatomy, he realized that the attachment of the extensor tendons impeded the independence of his fingers (Fig 2). The tendons that extend the fingers are connected by ligaments (intertendinous connections), which, although they provide stability, help to prevent independent movement. It seems that this very issue still concerns soloists even today. Cases are reported that musicians have resorted to Orthopedic Surgeons or Plastic Surgeons for the cross-section of these ligaments and the release from their "tyranny".

At that time, various devices with the characteristic brand name "Dactylion" were promising the release of fingers bloodlessly, in a guaranteed and definite way (Fig 3). Their inventor is regarded to be Henri Herz (1803-1888), a pianist and composer, who profited by his method. All it took for the user was to follow closely the instructions and to be armed with nerve, persistence, and patience [3]. These devices, however, did not in any way guarantee that the result would be in line with the expectations of an exceptional pianist, such as Schumann, who was living in a state of fantastic and impractical thinking.

We are not entirely sure of what was the real cul-





Figure 4. The first page of "Neue Zeitschrift für Musik", Issue 18 (October 28, 1853), with Schumann's article for Johannes Brahms.

pirit behind Schumann's injury of the ring finger of his right hand and essentially its stultification. Was the device fit to his hand incorrectly? Was his own tampering for a faster and better result did not work? Did he undergo surgery that unfortunately resulted in the rupture of his extensor tendon? The answer remains a mystery, although research that is more recent is shifting our thinking to other versions, which we will refer to in the following sections.

### Eusebius and Florestan

In the early years of his married life with Clara, Schumann devoted all of his time to his work and his family needs. However, the gradual deterioration of his health, the injury to the hand that made him unable to play the piano, as well as the gigantic stress of psycho-mental disorders, forced him to work in a feverish page. As a result of his personal deadlocks, he became involved to spiritual requests, while at the same time he suffered from auditory



Figure 5. The mental asylum in Eendenich, near Bonn, where Schumann was hospitalized from 1854 until his death in 1856.

hallucination, overwhelmed by the "A-note anxiety" and vowed to occasionally receiving music messages from above, dictated by Schubert and Mendelssohn. Those days, he met Johannes Brahms.

No one can accurately guess the conflicting emotions that were wrestling within Schumann's wounded soul, watching young Johannes rush into his home and fascinate the equally young and attractive Clara with his personality and unrecognizable genius. Jealousy plays dangerous games and, in vibrant delusional souls, it can lead to paranoid behavior. It was at the same time that Robert openly demanded that he would be held in an asylum. Without saying a word, he attempted to drown himself in the Rhine.

The issue of Robert Schumann's mental illness has been of interest to researchers. The causes that led to it and the special circumstances for its resurgence are a matter of controversy even today. There were opposing views intended to soften the impression and restore his posthumous reputation. One such position was claimed by Eugenie, one of composer's daughters, who in a book devoted to her father's memory, attempted -without much persuasiveness- to support the case for his sanity. For her, Schumann's established mental illness was the result of physical and psychological overwork, ruling out organic causes and hereditary predisposition [5].

A careful look at Schumann's writings can illuminate some details in his thinking. These writings



**Figure 6.** Robert and Clara Schumann in a lithograph in 1847, with a personal dedication.

are not pieces of his personal communication or his diaries but his articles in the magazine "*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*" (Fig 4). The fixation to sign his articles with a different pseudonym each time was no accidental. This option could certainly have been a clever tactic of him, so his criticism could sometimes be authoritarian and some other times lenient. However, the sobriety, the prudence, and the modesty that characterize Eusebius on one hand, and the anarchic impulsivity and romantic agitation that dominate Florestan's temperament, are the two Faces of Janus; two opposing personalities constantly fighting in his soul trying to express themselves; the earliest manifestations of a divisive psyche [5].

#### Schizophrenia or bipolar disorder or "gelatinous" tumor of the brain?

In recent years, the search for the Schumann's psycho-mental condition, informed by his symptoms



**Figure 7.** This daguerreotype (photograph) captures six of Schumann's eight children.

and peculiar behavior, has come together with the study of his musical works. It is certain that his disease inevitably affected his production in the late period of his life. It is argued that, even in his early works, traces of underlying disorder are visible. In the famous "*Carnaval*", Opus 9, the alternation of ideas and the relentless fluttering of matter from one subject to another can only be reconciled if we accept that they are creatures of a disturbed bipolar personality.

The perception of Schumann's music as a diagnostic tool has a long history. In 1906, the German psychiatrist Paul Julius Möbius, a pioneer of the idea that mental illness is due to inherited degeneration of the brain, published a pathological description regarding the composer [6]. Möbius claims, "By listening to Schumann's music we conclude that he was very nervous". He himself suggests that the underlying disease was, without a doubt, schizophrenia.

Other scholars echo the initial diagnosis first made by Franz Richarz, a physician at Schumann's sanatorium of Endenich, where the composer remained for the last two years of his life (Fig 5). Richarz in his medical report mentioned progressive paraly-



sis, excessive fatigue, and fatal mental exhaustion as the cause of death. The truth is that Schumann's contemporaries supported this view, such as the violinist Joseph Joachim, to whom both Schumann and Brahms had dedicated their violin concerts [3]. There is no doubt that this report was later disseminated and prevailed to preserve Schumann's legacy. A recent paper by Janisch and Nauhaus supports the existence of a "gelatinous" tumor at the base of the brain [7]. The researchers claim that the composer was suffering from a colloid cyst, a craniopharyngioma, a chordoma, or a chordoid meningioma. While psychiatrists listen to his compositions to diagnose underlying disease, musicophiles use psychiatric diagnoses to understand his works.

### Syphilis and Mercury

In 1950, British researchers Eliot Slater and Alfred Meyer were the first to put forwards the theory of Schumann's "manic depression" due to a neuro-syphilis attack. Their point was based on the ups-and-downs of his work, as in times of euphoria his compositions were more and more inspired, while in times of depression they were characterized by poor imagination [2].

When in 2006, 150 years after Schumann's death, medical records from the asylum of Eendenich were published in full (except for a few pages that were unfortunately lost during World War II), confirming investigators' thoughts: without doubt, Schumann had died of neurosyphilis [8]. Medical knowledge at that time could not diagnose the disease definitely, although its clinical symptomatology could have supported this diagnosis.

This diagnosis can even explain the clumsiness of his right hand, as neurosyphilis (or tertiary syphilis) infects the central nervous system and results in paralysis of both upper and lower extremities. In the early 19th century, *salvarsan* (which gave hope, years later, with the experiments of Paul Ehrlich) had not yet been discovered, as was the case with *penicillin* of Alexander Fleming, which gave the final blow against causative organism, the *Treponema pallidum* [9-11].


Schumann's infestation of syphilis is likely, con-

sidering his uncontrolled sexual activity before meeting Clara Wieck. After his marriage, he never committed adultery (Fig 6). He had always been an exemplary husband and father of eight children, struggling to assist in their upbringing (Fig 7). The most likely version for this sexually transmitted infection indicates the home-maid chosen by his father. The incubation lasted for several years until the disease began, as Schumann was living a prudent life.

However, even this version of events is not convincing. According to studies by musicologist and literary scholar Eric Sams, Schumann's clinical symptomatology during his hospital stay in Eendenich and the details of his death, point out that he was poisoned by mercury. Mercury pharmaceuticals were prescribed in small doses in those years for the treatment of syphilis and it was thus likely for the clueless patient to exceed the indicated dose and suffer the results of the effects of the element.

Nowadays, we know that peripheral neuropathy is at the forefront of the effects of mercury poisoning, while the consumption of organic mercury is usually accompanied by peripheral vision impairment, stinging or needle-like sensations in the extremities and mouth, loss of coordination, muscle weakness, and other impairments of speech and hearing, inevitably leading to death. It seems that Schumann's self-injury was not the only reason for the loss of his virtuosity [12-14]. It was preceded by the attack of neurosyphilis, the progressive manifestation of its symptoms and mercury poisoning, which often causes more woes than the expected therapy.

### Conclusions

Medical records referring to psychiatric symptoms are difficult to make out because of the particular geopolitical conditions in which they occur. Schumann's complicated and incomplete correspondence, his music sheets, and medical diagnoses that we typically use to study his life, can have many interpretations. It is almost certain that his work and his tumultuous life will remain an unsolved mystery for years to come. So let us enjoy his inspirational compositions with no more second thoughts. 

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