

Robert Schumann's "Märchenbilder" or Fairytale Pictures for viola and piano were written in 1851, a time when Schumann, as new municipal music director, was grappling with the problems of being a conductor. Despite audiences' initially very positive response, the "curious clumsiness in conducting" that Richard Wagner had once noticed in Schumann soon became apparent, adding professional tensions to the health problems that had plagued him for so long: from 1844 on, the mental illness which had first become apparent in 1833 led to increasingly severe crises, bringing with them psychoses, hallucinations and stubborn insomnia.

In such circumstances, the "Märchenbilder" theme seems like "escapism", the harassed and threatened romantic genius's flight to the haven of the eternal mother and of childhood dreams. The fairytale's archaic values were familiar to every educated person since the Grimm brothers' cardinal work. The choice of cover illustration for the first print (a storytelling old woman surrounded by children, in the manner of Ludwig Richter), which he must surely have authorized, shows to what extent Schumann also appreciated the picturesque component of fairytales. Yet while the first movement breathes lyrical geniality and the second illustrates childish wooden saber rattling, the third movement is soon dominated by sinister goings-on: when the scurrying, shadowy triplets confront the defiant march rhythm, the fairytale switches to a parable of reality, and the artist's hard existential struggle shines through the programmatic escapism. The last movement is like an infinitely wistful farewell; except for a short romantic interlude, the basic mood is one of sorrow.

Schumann's Fairytale Pictures are one of the pearls of the viola repertoire. A so-called "urtext edition", which attempts to render Schumann's autograph with all its problematic readings, while a reasonable assumption, is limited by textual interpretation. The Amadeus publishers and I have therefore decided that for all the works that Schumann prepared for publication before his last illness and internment, it is the first edition corrected by the author, and not the autograph alone, that represents the composer's "last will". There are so many cases in which Schumann was still making alterations to the proofs that one can truly say that the process of composition continued until the end of the final proof-reading. For this reason, the first edition from June 1852 is the textual basis for the present new edition. It bears the title: "Mährchen Bilder. / Vier Stücke / für Pianoforte und Viola / (Violine ad libitum) / Herrn J. von Wasielewskij / zugeeignet von / Robert Schumann / Op. 113. / Cassel, bei C. Luckhardt." The dedicatee Joseph Wasielewskij (1822–1896) was the leader in Schumann's Düsseldorf orchestra, later becoming a musicologist. Apart from the first great Schumann biography, he wrote fundamental histories of violin and cello playing. The fact that Schumann dedicated his viola pieces to him is indicative of viola playing during the mid-19th century. While part and parcel of musical life, it was far from emancipated, being often and lovingly played by many leading violinists but not yet in the hands of "exclusive" viola players, as was to happen 30 years later under Hermann Ritter. Ulrich Drüner