

# RIDING THE CREST

Small is beautiful in Schumann's hands.

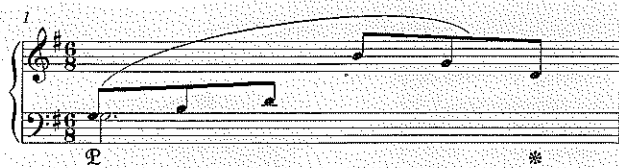
**Joseph Smith** explores a minor gem

In his *Album for the Young*, Schumann gives the bulk of the pieces programmatic titles. But even when he includes an example of a standard genre, the genre is still transformed into Schumann. With the 'Little Study', he gives us an unexpectedly tender and gentle piece.

Schumann provided some of the *Album* pieces with tempo markings, some with metronome markings, some with both, and some with neither. The 'Little Study' has only the indication 'To be played gently and very evenly.' This of course tells us nothing about tempo. Some pianists take it for granted that because the piece is a 'study,' it is fast. True, an *étude*, by definition, explores some specific technical problem, but the problem is not necessarily velocity! In fact, this piece is musically satisfying fast or slow, and at either tempo it addresses the technical problem stated by the marking – playing gently and evenly (one could perform it twice: once fast and once slow!).

When I begin to study a piece, I generally place a mark after notes that must be released in time to avoid collisions between the hands. But in this piece, every single bar contains notes in the left hand that are immediately re-struck by the right hand. Here, seeking a pattern of movement is more useful than attending to individual notes. Over-holding the first note of each bar – sustaining it with the finger through the bar – may help us to play the following two quavers short enough, and still maintain the feeling of legato (ex 1).

Ex 1



The first right-hand note of each bar outlines an implied melody in the soprano, but 'bringing out' this particular melody entails a special danger. Since the pattern here always has an intervallic gap between the final quaver of the left hand and the first of the right hand, an emphasis on the melody notes can make the piece sound accented rather than flowing, as called for by the marking 'very evenly.' One can solve this by making a little crescendo in the three left-hand notes so that the first right-hand note is heard both as melody and as continuation of the quaver flow. Does this seem obvious? Well, perhaps; but in avoiding collisions we may tend to swallow the last note of the left hand – the very note that should lead us into the right-hand melody note.

Among Schumann's piano works, the *Album* is unusually rich in detailed and specific original pedallings, probably because it is didactic. In the 'Little Study,' most of the pedallings extend for one bar, but where the harmony allows, Schumann sometimes takes two bars in a single pedal (for instance, bars 7-8 and bars 9-10). His goal seems to be continuity of the bass line – presumably the slurs over bars indicate the flow from hand to hand, not an articulation

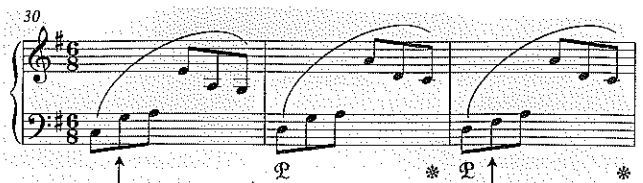
Crafting a minor masterpiece:  
Robert Schumann



between the bars. Therefore, I believe that the pedalling should be legato – that each pedal change should come *as* the new note is sounding, rather than before. Why then, the young may ask, are the asterisks marked at the ends of the bars? Alas, the romantic era's system of pedal notation (P and P\*) indicates the depression, and an asterisk the release) does not allow the composer to indicate the lifting and depression of the pedal in a single rapid gesture, even if this is his intention (the later bracket system is an improvement).

As a late starter on the piano, I am in the unusual position of remembering the puzzlements and misconceptions of my earliest study. Because a novice reads notes extremely slowly, he or she may fail to distinguish chord tones from non-chord tones. As a result, bar 31 and similar places are likely to sound like a 'wrong' harmony. A simple explanation is in order: some notes don't belong to the harmony – they create a tension which is released when they resolve to a note that does belong. The G in bar 31 is left over from bar 30, and when we arrive at bar 32, we are relieved to hear it resolve to the F# that *does* belong to the harmony (ex 2).

Ex 2



In the romantic era, the form of the *étude* evolved from a practice piece to a concert piece. With his *Symphonic Etudes in the Form of Variations*, Schumann made a giant contribution to the concert *étude*. With the 'Little Study' he made... a little contribution! But because the pianist will encounter it early, its soft rustling sends an important message: an *étude* can be a mood piece.

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