The man who made Romanticism

by Hannah Niemeier

If you’ve watched *The Nutcracker*, listened to Schumann’s *Kreisleriana*, or read Edgar Allan Poe, you’ve encountered the influence of E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776–1822), the man who dreamed many features of the Romantic movement. “Mozart, Schumann, & the Tales of Hoffmann,” a recent concert and lecture at Bohemian National Hall in Manhattan, traced Hoffmann’s development and later artistic impact through quintets by Mozart—the composer who inspired much of Hoffmann’s work—and Schumann, that quintessential Romantic whose own art was, in turn, directly informed by Hoffmann’s writing and music.
Many writers and musicians in the nineteenth century distilled their Romanticism from this unconventional Renaissance man. Born in Prussia to a family of jurists, Hoffmann was compelled to study law, but in his first position as a clerk in Berlin, he began to find his own way—or ways—in the world as a composer and an artist. In a typically bold move, he sent his first operetta to the Queen of Prussia near the turn of the century. Later, he took a job in the Prussian provinces, where his creativity was less productive to his career: he got himself “relocated” in 1802 for drawing caricatures of military officers. But exile must have been stimulating. He began writing essays and plays, and he eventually moved back to Berlin, where he dabbled in theater, composition, fiction, and music criticism. He wrote what has been called the definitive review of Beethoven’s Fifth—working from the musical score alone.
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Hoffmann’s artistic pursuits always spilled over into one another. Early in his career as a writer, he created Johannes Kreisler, a fictional composer whose creativity is both helped and hindered by his extremes of personality—Jekyll and Hyde long before Jekyll and Hyde. After his first mention in newspaper reviews, Kreisler featured in three of Hoffmann’s novels, but he became much more than an imaginary character. He served as Hoffmann’s pen name, inspired Schumann’s Kreisleriana, and continued to crop up in art and music as the figure of the mad creative genius pervaded the Romantic mood and temperament.
Hoffmann is remembered as a writer first. His “uncanny stories” set the tone for much of the Romantic profusion of Gothic horror tales in the later nineteenth century. It is often said that Poe wrote the first detective story, but it was Hoffmann’s 1819 novella *Mademoiselle de Scudéri*, about a woman attempting to track down a murderer with something against men delivering jewelry to their mistresses, that inspired “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” more than two decades later. Ghost tales and horror stories were Hoffmann’s forte: he tiptoed between the natural and the supernatural, dreams and reality and explored the places where good and evil spirits meet and monsters prey on innocent children. A well-known example is “The Sandman,” from the 1817 short story collection *Die Nachtstücke* (*The Night Pieces*), which stars a man who steals the eyes of children who stay up past their bedtime and feeds them to his children on the moon. Today Hoffmann’s best-known tale is his 1816 “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King,” which was the
inspiration for Tchaikovsky’s much tamer musical version. In homage, the prelude to the concert under review was Tchaikovsky’s “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.”

An illustration by E. T. A. Hoffmann for the 1816 version of “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King.” Photo: University of Oldenburg.

But Hoffmann’s fiction was as much a musical inspiration as it was a literary one, for both himself and others. Hoffmann considered music the highest form of art and renamed himself after Mozart—Ernst Theodor Wilhelm became E. T. A. (for Amadeus)—claiming that when listening to the king of classical composers, he heard “the mysterious language of a distant spiritual kingdom.” Hoffmann’s story “Don Juan” was inspired by Don Giovanni, and Mozart’s sound runs through Hoffmann’s own compositions. He enjoyed composing Mozart-style sonatas, and he adopted Mozart’s musical idiom in operas like Undine.

Fittingly, then, first on the program at Bohemian National Hall was Mozart’s Quintet in G minor (K 516), a piece composed in 1787, decades before Hoffmann jump-started the Romantic period. But its sound is almost Romantic in its tragic tone, colored by its key of G minor, which Mozart saved for his most dramatic Kreislerian moments. Mozart is also proto-Romantic in the way he manipulates the set quintet form (for example, by placing two minor-mode Adagios side by side instead of moving

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into a major-mode Scherzo or Allegro movement) for an emotional effect, leaving listeners with a sense of yearning as the musical tensions are never quite resolved. The boundary of the form is subtly and disturbingly breached with a whisper of the “mysterious language,” the sense of constrained passion, that Hoffmann so adored in Mozart.

Not only were Hoffmann’s teachers musicians, but so was his most famous follower, Robert Schumann. “One hardly dares breathe when one reads Hoffmann,” Schumann wrote. He claimed that Hoffmann was at the heart of his music, and the titles of some of his most famous pieces prove it: Fantasiestücke, Nachtstücke, and Kreisleriana are all Hoffmann vintage.
The story of *Kreisleriana* reveals how similarly Schumann’s and Hoffmann’s art infused each of their lives. Both were reluctant lawyers, right-brained men in a left-brain profession, with personalities subject to extreme moods that bordered on mental illness. Schumann’s music famously spans the creative continuum between mild and wild, and in his compositional method, he was like Hoffmann’s Kreisler: “sometimes mad, sometimes lucid.” He wrote the eight-movement *Kreisleriana*, a representative work of Romantic-period piano music, in four days in 1838.

Schumann’s music famously spans the creative continuum between mild and wild, and in his compositional method, he was like Hoffmann’s Kreisler. Yet both men were aware of the dangers of artistic passion. Schumann was a genius, but an unstable one. He often went into creative depressions in which he could hardly function, let alone make music. Haunted by the idea that creativity and madness came from the same place, he said his greatest fear, which increased along with his musical mastery, was of losing his mind. But it was a fate he couldn’t escape; in 1856, at the age of forty-six, he died of syphilis. In a coincidence that seems to belong in one of his “uncanny stories,” Hoffmann had died at the same age, and of the same disease (though more than three decades earlier).

The concert at Bohemian National Hall demonstrated the way Schumann, through Hoffmann’s inspiration, defined the music of the Romantic period. The second selection tied together Mozart, Hoffmann, and Schumann with the latter’s *Piano Quintet in E flat major, Op. 44*, a piece that shaped the Romantic quintet by adding a piano in the place of the traditional second viola. But the governing emotion of the piece is in no way triumphal: the theme, taken from Mozart, sounds like a funeral march, winding from part to part like a procession through the rainy streets of Schumann’s Bonn or Hoffmann’s Berlin.

For Hoffmann and Schumann, the tension between inspired madness and virtuosic lucidity was the source of the immortality of their music, but also of the brevity of their lives. So the selection was fitting: the quintet was both eulogy and celebration. From Hoffmann, through Schumann, and beyond, the Romantic, Kreislerian spirit continues to inspire—and, at times, to terrify.
The frontispiece of an 1841 edition of Hoffmann’s collected works, featuring Hoffmann’s own drawings. Photo: Bavarian State Library.

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